

A brief introduction to my new story:

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Warner Bros. 2001

Quantum Leap is owned by Donald Bellisario. However, this is not really used in the story, just in the initial chapter for Harry's journey back.

Timeline is owned by Michael Crichton. Again, this is just touched upon in Harry's travel back to the past.

Author's Note: Several aspects of the magical world are different in the fanfiction I write. The currency situation is one. As such, the currency valuation in any Seel'vor fanfiction will be as follows:

1 Knut 10 pence (0.20)

1 Sickle 2 pounds, 90 pence (5.80)

1 Galleon 49 pounds, 30 pence (98.60)

The concepts of 'Ancient and Noble' Houses is only briefly touched in canon, in Order of the Phoenix, where Sirius describes the House of Black. It is never accurately described in any detail, nor is the concept of 'Lords' being the heads of houses. As such, any references to Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of XXX is purely fanon.

– CHAPTER ONE –

The Leap Back

The war had ended. Harry, and the shattered remnants of the Order of the Phoenix had won; driven back the darkness... for now. It would come again. It always did. He was one of the few that could stand against it.

For several decades, he watched and waited, looking for the signs that would indicate a new Dark Lord rising. It seemed, though, that the legend of the 'Chosen One' was still active. It had been over half a century since the final battle, but he'd become more and more disillusioned with life.

He'd been prepared to end it, ever since his wife was brutally murdered during the last battle. It was, ironically, her death that signalled the end of the darkness. Then, something changed.

A man was born. He was a Muggle, limited in power, but unmatched in brains. Even his wife would not have been able to match Sam's raw intellectual power. When the proposal first made it's way across his desk, he glanced it over, before tossing it to one side.

Weeks passed, and the document never strayed far from his mind. He'd go to bed, thinking about the fascinating technology that was being speculated. He'd wake up, dreaming that the project would be a success, and he'd be able to see her again.

When he returned to his office, he reread the proposal, deciding that the Marauder Foundation would be able to fund the project. His long life, now nudging up past a century, had given him stupendous wealth, thanks to the tricky little goblins.

It took five years. Five years for the project to get to initial test stage. In a freezing cold cavern underneath the New Mexico desert, a room was constructed. The components cost millions of Galleons, but they were worth it. The project's construction, when completed, would allow the use of temporal quantum technology to view the past.

Strict rules had been created about the project. It was for observation only. Using neurological scanning and quantum projection technology, it would be possible to observe the past, without making any changes to the time-line.

That was the greatest fear of the project. If someone were to manipulate the time-line, it could destroy everything that had been worked for. A series of protocols had been put in place to ensure that only the most trustworthy people would be able to even know about the project, let alone enter the site.

He was one of those people. As the principal source of funds, he had carte blanche to enter the project, but not use the equipment.

Of course, He was a wizard, and the laws of Muggles meant little to him anymore. He would enter the project, and be the first to use the Accelerator. If they tried to stop him? Well... there were reasons that the darkness were afraid of him.

He entered the Project's Accelerator Chamber, cane in hand. The injuries he'd sustained during the war had never really healed, even after a century of the best medical assistance both the Muggle and magical worlds could offer him. That would change, though, once his journey was complete.

The physical properties of breaking the quantum boundary, or 'stepping into the world', but heavily speculated, but no-one knew for sure. The primary theory was that the time traveller would take the form of their past self, time herself obliterating the original copy, and using the Quantum fields generated to regenerate the traveller.

At least... he hoped so.

Now... he thought to himself, wrapping his cloak tight around his ancient body, Now, I have a chance to change everything. I will make the journey, and things will go right.

He stepped into the central circle of the Accelerator, jabbing his cane onto the ground. The concealed magical cores accessed the device, setting up a powerful Protego shield, that nothing would be able to penetrate.

A series of nuclear reactors started up, channelling their immense power into a series of capacitors, which would be used to start the antimatter reaction chamber, located directly below the Accelerator room. The onset of Antimatter technology was a closely guarded secret by the Marauder Foundation, only to be used by the most honest and trustworthy people.

In the centre of the Accelerator, a series of blue lightning bolts started to arc through the air. The power was considerable, but nothing compared to what was to come.

In the background, he could hear the technicians and researchers bleating in fear.

“What’s happening?”

“Who’s that?”

“The Accelerator’s active!”

“He’s leaping!”

The last shout was the one that gathered the attention of everyone there. The project was still in the initial test phase.

“He can’t leap yet! We’re not ready!” The voice of the Admiral, the project’s administrator and principal observer cut through the cacophony of sound. “Shut it down! Shut it all down!”

The technicians tried to comply with his demands, but it didn’t matter. The reaction had become self-sustaining, feeding on the pure power from the antimatter reactor, with a healthy boost of Harry’s own magic.

“He’ll destroy everything!” A final voice shouted. And it was true. He would. But none of that mattered. When the leap was complete, it would all be gone anyway.

The landscape around him was changing. Instead of seeing the cool, smooth metal walls of the Accelerator chamber, he could see

battered stone walls, small holes giving the impression of a draughty room. In front of him, he could see a battered couch, the outline of a fat sleeping child on it. With a grin, Harry stepped forward, in essence stepping across time. As he passed through, the project disappeared from the time-stream, never having existed.

Harry James Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, the Man-Who-Won, the Chosen One had made his Quantum Leap.

– CHAPTER TWO –

The Arrival

Inside a ragged Hut on the Rock, a blaze of blue light erupted into the draughty living room. Inside the room, two young children were sleeping. One of them, roughly the size of a manatee, was dead to the world, and probably wouldn't notice a herd of hippogriffs bouncing on his butt. The other child, small, messy-haired, and far too thin, had fallen asleep a few hours ago. He'd been planning to stay up and wait for his birthday, but got bored of listening to Dudley's snores.

The light streaked out, searching for something similar. When it encountered the small boy, it scanned his DNA, before vaporising the body, never to be seen again.

Harry stepped forward, dropping to his knees in agony as his DNA was over-written with the newly acquired sample. His body, damaged and over a century old, reformed into an identical copy of the recently vaporised boy, before allowing him to slump to the floor.

"Okay..." He gasped through the pain. "That hurt." Taking stock of his situation, he glanced around, noticing the fat-arse sitting on the couch, and hearing the chainsaw massacre from the top of the stairs, that could only be Vernon Dursley. "Well, I'm back."

He glanced over at Dudley's watch, noting the time: 11:58pm.

In two minutes, everything changes. He could barely contain himself. Soon, he'd be seeing the woman he loved beyond life itself, and in a month, he'd be returning to the only place he could consider home.

A resounding 'crack' echoed throughout the hut, waking the chainsaw massacre upstairs, and the manatee to his left. Harry sat up, grabbing his glasses, and slipping them onto his nose.

Note to self: get contacts as soon as possible. He thought idly, while watching the door rock again on its hinges. With a final 'thump', the door fell inwards, revealing what could accurately be described as a

mountain of a man, wielding a pink umbrella.

He stepped into the draughty Hut, and took a look around, noting the two adults perching on the stairs, one of them armed with some kind of Muggle weapon.

“Sorry about that.” The giant began, bending over to pick up the door. He lifted it and placed it back into the door frame.

“I demand that you leave at once, sir!” Vernon hissed through clenched teeth. “You are breaking and entering, sir!” He raised the shotgun threateningly at Hagrid.

Hagrid stomped over, and bent the barrel of the shotgun. “Oh, dry up, Dursley, you great prune!” As soon as he released the barrel, the weapon discharged, blowing a hole into the ceiling. Hagrid turned to face the only boy he could see in the room.

“Well, I haven’t seen you since you was a baby, Harry, but you’re further along than I thought.” He patted his stomach. “Particularly around the middle.”

Dudley, terrified out of his mind, took a step back. “I-I’m not Harry.” He stammered.

Harry took this moment to step out from besides the fireplace. “I am.”

Hagrid looked over and grinned. “Well, of course you are!” He held out a hand, which Harry shook. Hagrid flopped onto the battered couch, pointing his wand at the fireplace. Tiny balls of flames erupted from the wand, filling the damp hut with warm air. He reached into his pockets, and began pulling out a motley assortment of items.

Harry took the poker, sausages and tea from Hagrid, and started to cook the meal.

“How’d you know how to do that?” Hagrid asked after a moment.

Harry gestured with his thumb at the Dursleys behind him. "I've been cooking for them since I was three years old." He replied simply, turning the sausages to make sure they wouldn't burn.

"Since you were three?" Hagrid asked. "Didn't know you liked cooking."

Harry shrugged, turning the sausages again. "Doesn't matter if I like cooking or not. These bastards," Harry again gestured at the Dursleys, "make me cook, clean and garden for them." He thought for a moment. "They're useful skills to have, really."

As expected, Hagrid heaved himself to his feet. "What?" He roared. "Make you work for 'em like a House Elf?"

Harry pulled the sausages from the flames. "What's a house elf?" He asked innocently.

Hagrid flopped down onto the battered couch, which groaned in submission. "That don't matter at the moment, Harry." He reached into his pocket. "Here, give me them sausages." He passed over the letter. "I reckon you should be reading that now."

Harry took the letter, opened it, and started to read. He quickly skimmed through the message, before looking up at Hagrid. "Is this a joke?"

"Blimey, Harry," Hagrid began, "didn't you wonder where your parents learnt it all? Haven't you ever made something happen? When you were frightened... or angry?" He looked at Harry's sheepish nod. "You're a wizard, Harry. And you'll be attending the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world!"

"He'll not be going!" Vernon hissed, obviously annoyed at being ignored by the two magical beings. "He'll be going to Stonewall High, and he'll be grateful for it!"

Hagrid stood again. Harry swore he could hear the couch sigh in relief, as Hagrid made his way in front of Vernon. "I suppose a great Muggle like yourself's gonna stop him."

"I hate that word." Harry muttered to himself.

"He'll be at the finest school for wizardry in the world! Seven years there, and he won't know himself! And... he'll be under the finest Headmaster Hogwarts has ever known! Albus... Dumbledore."

"I'll not pay for some crackpot old fool to teach him magic tricks!" Vernon ranted, only to be stopped when Hagrid's pink umbrella appeared under his nose.

"Never. Insult. Albus. Dumbledore. In front of me." Hagrid said slowly, before looking over at Dudley. He waved the umbrella, and a pig's tail erupted from Dudley's pyjamas. Harry quickly used a bit of wandless magic to complete the transformation, turning Dudley into a pig.

Hagrid looked at his umbrella with shock, before quickly jabbing it back into his coat. He leaned in close to Harry. "I'd... uh... I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention that to anyone at Hogwarts. Strictly speaking, I'm not allowed to do magic."

Harry nodded, and grabbed his shirt from the hook by the fireplace. Hagrid pulled the door off the hinges again, before stomping through. "Are you coming? Unless you'd rather stay, of course?" Hagrid had a cheeky grin.

The two headed into London, where they quickly took the tube to Charing Cross Road. On the way, Harry re-read his first Hogwarts letter, while Hagrid knitted... something big and yellow.

"Hagrid? Can we really get all this stuff in London?"

Hagrid nodded, and leaned close to Harry. "If you know where to go, Harry." He said, before straightening, and counting his stitches.

When the two got off the tube, Harry followed the giant down Charring Cross Road, until they stopped beneath a grubby pub billboard, showing the place to be the 'Leaky Cauldron'. Harry smiled as the door was opened, and the sounds and smells of the pub washed over him. He was truly back in the Wizarding world now.

He stepped into the pub, hiding behind Hagrid.

After Tom shouted over to Hagrid, who identified the reason he was there as Harry, the young wizard was swamped with 'well-wishers', read: 'busybodies', who were each trying to get a piece of him. Harry was debating either apparating away, or starting to hex people. In the end, Hagrid solved the dilemma by pulling him close, and forcing his way through the crowd.

When Hagrid introduced Harry to Professor Quirrell, Harry could see the tendrils of Black Magic that surrounded him, as well as feel the Legilimency attempt from the parasitic Voldemort on the back of his head. He tightened his Occlumency defences, before following Hagrid out of the pub.

Hagrid tried to hide his grin on his face when he saw Harry come alive at his first glimpse of Diagon Alley. The sights, the sounds, the smells of ordinary witches and wizards living their lives filled Harry's little face with joy.

"Welcome, Harry, to Diagon Alley." He led the way to Gringotts, pointing out the sign. "Mad to steal from the Goblins, Harry. Now, stick with me when we get inside. Goblins are clever beasties, smart as they come, but they ain't too friendly."

Hagrid stopped in front of the teller, who sneered down at them. "Yes?" He asked testily.

Hagrid stood up straight, putting his height at over nine feet, and peered down at the goblin. "Mr. Harry Potter would like to make a withdrawal."

The goblin grasped the edge of the desk, and pulled himself forward, staring at Harry, who looked back fearlessly. "And does Mr. Harry Potter... have his key?"

Hagrid thought for a moment. "Oh, no, I have that." He started digging into his pockets, placing the random contents on the teller's desk, who's nose wrinkled in disgust at the more bizarre items that

appeared, until Hagrid cried out in joy. "There's the little devil!" He handed the key over to the goblin, who took it, before appearing to relax slightly.

"This appears to be in order." He raised his hand and clicked his fingers, summoning one of the Goblins near the back of the lobby. "Griphook will take you to the vault."

"Also, I've got a letter hear from Professor Dumbledore. It's about the you-know-what in vault you-know-which."

The goblin looked startled for a moment, before straightening up. "Very well."

The cart ride was still as exhilarating as ever, causing Harry to let out a yell of glee as they sped through the vast caverns. All too soon, they slowed down, making Harry moan in disappointment.

"Vault 687." Harry got up out of the cart, following Griphook, who took the key and opened the vault. Harry stepped inside, idly noting that the vault was filled with a large amount of gold, silver and bronze. He scooped up a lot of the gold, dropping it into a small sack he found near the entry way. He wasn't particularly worried about running out, since he knew that this was just his trust vault, and the main Potter fortune was vast.

He ambled back into the cart, waiting for them to be taken to the next vault.

They shortly arrived at vault 711, where Hagrid reached in and took out a tiny grubby package, which he placed in one of the many pockets in his coat. "Best not to mention this to anyone at Hogwarts, all right?" He asked. Harry nodded.

Hagrid climbed back into the cart, and they sped off. On their way back to the surface, Harry leaned back and whispered to Griphook. "I know you said 'one speed only'. Is that true?" He asked, grinning at the Goblin.

Griphook said nothing, just grasped a lever. The cart doubled in speed, prompting Harry to bellow in joy, and Hagrid to moan in fear.

– CHAPTER THREE –

Lord Potter?

They left the bank, Hagrid a frighteningly pale shade of white and trembling, while Harry's cheeks were pink from the rapid velocity of the cart. "That was fun, Hagrid! Can we do it again?"

Hagrid turned green, and took a few deep breaths. "I don't think so, Harry." He said after a moment. "I'm gonna go and get a pick me up in the Cauldron. Will you be all right for the next half-hour or so?"

Harry just grinned and nodded, before setting off for Traveller's Trunks.

Inside the shop, Harry was presented with the smell of sawdust and varnish. He breathed deeply, before taking a stroll round the trunks, looking to see what was available.

An older man appeared behind Harry, looking him over with a critical eye. He fought the urge to simply throw the boy out. Based on his appearance, he wouldn't be buying anything expensive.

Harry had sensed the man approach, and turned to face him. "Good morning, sir." He said politely.

"What do you want, boy?" The man snapped, annoyed at wasting his time.

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "I'll have a Ham and Cheese sandwich, please." He said, biting down several nasty retorts.

"Don't sell sandwiches, boy." The man spat out, looking disgusted.

"I know." Harry replied testily. "Obviously," He drawled, "I want a trunk. That's why I came into a trunk shop."

"You sure you can afford one of my trunks, boy?" The man asked.

Not bothering to answer verbally, since the phrase 'money talks' works as well in the Wizarding world as the Muggle world, Harry pulled out the sack of Galleons he'd picked up in Gringotts. Instantly, the man changed, going from grumpy to smarmy in a nanosecond.

"Of course, sir." The man smarmed. "My apologies for my previous behaviour. I'm Cyril Agamemnon."

"Save it." Harry snapped. "I'm looking for a suitable trunk. I'll shortly be attending Hogwarts. I want something that'll last my entire time there."

"All of my trunks are durable, sir." Cyril replied, looking a bit offended. "If you take care of them, there's no reason it won't last the rest of your life."

Harry looked down his nose at the man. "I'm sure." He gestured to the larger, more expensive trunks. "I'm looking for something a little better than the standard school models."

"Of course, sir." Cyril smarmed again. For a moment, Harry was convinced he was going to start rubbing his hands together. It creeped him out a little bit.

"I want something with multiple compartments," Harry said firmly. "I want it to have a wardrobe section for my clothing, a library section, holding possibly thousands of books. A section for Quidditch equipment and a broomstick, and another section for holding a vast array of potions equipment and supplies." He stared imperiously at the creepy little man. "Can you supply such a thing?"

Cyril nodded, before leading Harry to the ugliest trunk he'd ever seen. It looked like it was made of cheap plastic, and would fall apart if someone coughed on it.

"Are you deliberately wasting my time, Mr. Agamemnon?" Harry asked. "I want quality, not the junk you pawn to the masses."

Harry rolled his eyes and walked away, looking at the more expensive trunks. He found a nice cherry-wood 5-section trunk,

tucked away at the back. He pulled it out, glancing quickly at it. "I'll take this one."

"Sir, that's fifty Galleons." Agamemnon said. "It's one of my more expensive trunks." (A/N: See introduction for currency conversion)

Harry reached into his sack, and counted out fifty of the heavy gold coins. He slapped them onto the counter. "What extra features do you offer?" Harry asked.

"The standard, sir." Agamemnon said, quickly scooping up the gold. "Full security system, keyed to your personal magical signature. Wards against theft, fire, water. The usual."

"How much?" Harry asked, reaching into his sack.

"Five Galleons." Agamemnon said, wondering how far he could push the young gentleman.

"Two." Harry replied instantly, drawing out the coins.

Agamemnon grumbled to himself. "Fine." He waved his wand, quickly casting the charms.

The rest of Harry's time in Diagon Alley passed, as he purchased new clothing, all his necessary potions equipment, which required going into the smelly Apothecary and erupting ten minutes later to a colossal sneezing fit, and a new broomstick from Quality Quidditch. He'd have to sneak it into the school, but he wasn't worried.

All that was left was his wand and pet. He was hoping Hagrid was in a generous mood, and would reunite him with his familiar.

As he left Madam Malkins, fortunately avoiding Malfoy, Pompous little git! Harry made his way to Ollivander's. This was another 'friend' he was looking forward to seeing.

His visit went exactly the same as during the original time-line, including Ollivander's creepy outlook on life, as his prediction of 'great things' from Harry. Frankly, he couldn't get the hell out of there fast enough.

As he was walking out, Harry looked up to see the giant form of Hagrid shambling closer, obviously recovered from the ordeal of the Gringotts carts. In his hands he held an owl cage, containing a beautiful snowy-white owl.

Hedwig! Harry screamed mentally. The owl looked up, her eyes widening when she saw Harry. He could feel the bond of a familiar beginning, as Hedwig aligned herself to Harry.

"Happy Birthday, Harry." Hagrid said, looking down on his small charge, and feeling a rush of warmth when Harry looked up at him with tears in his eyes.

"Thank you." He whispered, the sentiment echoed in his thoughts by Hedwig.

"Well, that's everything, Harry." Hagrid said, pulling out a pocket-watch. "I'd best be getting you back to your relatives' house."

Harry took the cage from Hagrid, cooing softly at Hedwig. "That's okay, Hagrid." He looked up. "I know you need to get back to Hogwarts to drop off that package. I can take the train back."

Hagrid looked down at the watch again, and then back at Harry. "You're sure?" He asked, uncertain about leaving his charge alone in the Alley.

"I'll be fine." Harry replied, eager to get rid of Hagrid for one final piece of business in the Alley.

Hagrid nodded, then pulled out his umbrella and Disapparated.

Harry turned back towards Gringotts, and started to scurry down the Alley. "Now... for the last order of the day..."

Harry re-entered Gringotts, and headed straight for Griphook. "Ah, Griphook. Do you have a few moments?"

Griphook nodded slowly. "I do, Mr. Potter." He replied formally. "Does this require a private meeting?"

Harry nodded. "I think it should, sir." He said respectfully. Griphook simply nodded, and led Harry to a conference room.

As the two were settled, with the obligatory offer of tea and biscuits, Harry leaned back. "Griphook, I would like to talk about my family."

Griphook's eyebrows shot up. "What, specifically, would you like to talk about?"

Harry leaned forward, keeping his hands in his lap and his teeth concealed. "As I understand it, since I'm the last Potter, scion of an Ancient and Noble house, I am able to claim emancipation and House Lordship at age eleven. Is this correct?"

Griphook discretely jabbed a button on the underside of the desk, while nodding. "Yes. It has happened in rare occasions in the past, Mr. Potter." He said, not wanting to commit to anything.

"I also know that I'm the last of Godric Gryffindor and Rowena Ravenclaw's line. As such, I am considered an Heir of Hogwarts." Harry said, feeling the approach of another goblin, this one with far more power than Griphook.

The door opened, to Griphook's relief, as an elder goblin walked in. Even though he was a goblin, Harry was very jealous of his suit. It looked superb! He shook his head.

"Mr. Potter." The elder goblin spoke with a voice like gravel. "I am Director Ragnok, Manager of this bank."

Harry stood and bowed deeply. "Good day, Director. Please, call me Harry."

Both goblins were taken aback by the blatant display of respect from a wizard to a goblin. Something that hadn't happened in... decades, at least.

"Thank you, Harry." Ragnok said, waving Harry back to his chair. "I'm honoured by your gesture. How can we help you today?"

Harry took a deep breath. "As I was asking Griphook, I understand that the last scion of an Ancient and Noble House can claim emancipation and Lordship over their House at age eleven. Since today is my eleventh birthday, I would like to claim my Lordship over House Potter today."

Ragnok leaned forward, intrigued by the young Lord. "It is possible, Harry. However, it's not been done for centuries. Your Ministry frowns on emancipated minors."

Harry nodded. "I understand that. However, the Potter Family has been bereft of Lordship for a decade. It's time that I took up the mantle."

Griphook glanced at Ragnok, nodding slightly.

"Are you also aware of your family's roots, Harry?" Ragnok asked, propping his hand in his chin.

"I am aware that the Potter family are the last descendants of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, making me a Founders' Heir, and the so-called 'Heir of Hogwarts'." Harry replied. "However, I don't particularly want these facts to be known."

Ragnok leaned back, looking over Harry critically. "Then why are you asking for this?"

"Because I want the emancipation." Harry said. "I want to escape from my relatives. They're not the nicest people in the world, and my freedom would be beneficial." He cocked his head, smiling. "Plus, the whole removal from the 'Restriction of Underage Magic' would be nice, too."

Ragnok clicked his fingers twice, summoning several scrolls of parchment. "This is a complete list of your holdings. With regards to your Trust Vault..."

Harry picked up the first scroll. "Everything should go into the Potter Family Vault, and I'll use that." Harry said, looking through the list of properties. He found what he was looking for.

"I'd also like to have my official residence moved here."

– CHAPTER FOUR –

Hermione

The next few days were the best of Harry's life to date. He'd moved into the flat above the vacant shop at 93 Diagon Alley. He'd quickly set up a nice home, purchasing furniture and supplies.

However, the incident he was truly waiting for happened on the 5th of August. Hermione Granger, the love of his life, had entered Diagon Alley.

Watching from the windows of his now Fidelus-charmed flat, he saw her enter the Alley, heading straight for Flourish and Blotts. Harry quickly grabbed his jacket and shoes, and rushed out. As he entered the bookshop, he quickly glanced around, looking for the little girl who would become the woman he loved so much.

She was in the History section, and Harry had to bite down a laugh as she picked up her first ever copy of *Hogwarts: A History*. He approached her, smiling politely.

"Hello."

Hermione looked up to see a boy, about her age, with the dreamiest green eyes she'd ever seen, looking back at her. "Hello." She replied.

"My name's Harry." He said, holding out his hand.

"Charmed." Hermione said, grasping his hand lightly, pumping once, then releasing it. "I'm Hermione."

"You going to Hogwarts?" Harry asked, gesturing at the heavy tome in her hands.

"Yes." She replied softly. "I'm going to be a first-year."

Harry nodded. "Me, too." He cocked his head slightly. "Looking forward to it?"

Hermione nodded slowly. "Yes. It's a bit of a relief, really."

"I know what you mean." Harry said. "All those weird little things that kept happening. At least now, we know why."

She nodded. "Yes." Hermione turned slightly, looking back at the bookshelves.

Harry ignored the snub, going over to one of the shelves he knew most decent people avoided like the plague, and picked up a slim volume. He headed over to the checkout, paid for it, and headed back to her.

He passed her the book, watching her scowl as she read the title. She looked up at him with a death glare he'd come to recognise. "Mudbloods and Purebloods?" She asked. "Why on earth would I want to read this?"

Harry repressed the smirk on his face. "I've already paid for it. I suggest you read it, Hermione. It's... enlightening."

Harry turned, and left the store, ignoring the daggers she was trying to jab into his back from her eyes.

The remainder of August flew by, as Harry devoured his textbooks, learning all he could. He'd gone back to Ollivander's to have the tracking charm on his wand removed, and tore through the first-year curriculum in record time. Of course, he'd long since past this level of education, or even the need for a wand, but it was good to get back into the form he needed.

September 1st rolled round, and Harry rushed to Kings Cross, his trunk shrunk down into his pocket, with Hedwig making her way there on her own.

Harry opened the compartment, and swallowed down the cry of glee at having found her. She looked up, and her eyes narrowed.

"Do you mind if I join you?" He asked politely.

Hermione, never one to be rude, acquiesced, allowing Harry to throw his trunk up onto the roof rack, and sat down opposite her. For a moment, neither one of them said anything, just engaged in a furious staring competition.

“So...” Harry broke away first. “Did you read the book I gave you?”

“Yes.” Hermione’s response was frosty, lowering the temperature in the compartment by ten degrees.

“And?” Harry asked.

“I think it’s a load of biased old rubbish.” She replied simply. “And, to tell you the truth, I’m quite offended that you gave it to me.”

Before Harry could offer his retort, the door opened, revealing a pale-skinned blonde, with two small gorillas behind him. His tone, when he spoke, was filled with arrogance. “I’ve heard that Harry Potter’s on the train.”

Harry looked up. “I’ve heard the same thing.” He said. “Why are you looking for him?”

Malfoy looked down his nose. “That’s none of your concern.” He gazed up at Harry’s hairline. “And who are you?”

“You know, it’s good manners to introduce yourself before demanding other people’s names. I would have thought you’d have known that.”

“It’s obvious you’re a Mudblood.” Malfoy replied. “Otherwise you would know who I am.” He shook his head. “Mudbloods... you shouldn’t even be allowed to go to Hogwarts. The Pureblood families shouldn’t have to study with such riff-raff as you.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Really? Well... let’s see. Albino... piss-poor intelligence... two butt-monkeys behind you. You must be a Malfoy.”

Draco raised his nose in the air. “And what of it?”

“Nothing.” Harry said.

"Then why comment?"

"No, I said you're a nothing, Malfoy. You're a small-minded, petty, arrogant little bigot." He paused and smirked. "Your father must be so proud of you."

"When my father hears of this-" Malfoy's pale skin gained a touch of pink.

"You know... I knew you were gonna say that." Harry replied, his voice cool and deadly. "When your father hears of this, Malfoy, pass on a message from me." He stood, towering over the small boy. "I'll be coming for him."

Malfoy sniffed, trying to look down on Harry. Considering he was a good five inches smaller, not an easy feat. "And who are you to demand such a thing of me?"

Harry smirked. "I'm Harry Potter."

Malfoy immediately brightened. "Ah... I was hoping to meet you." He gazed imperiously at Hermione. "You shouldn't be sitting with such filth as this, Potter." He held out his hand. "Some families are better than others in the Wizarding world. I can help you there."

Harry cocked his head. "Weren't you listening to me a minute ago? The part where I said you're a small-minded, petty, arrogant little bigot?" He looked back at Hermione, then back to Malfoy. "And who the fuck are you to call my travelling companion 'filth'?"

Malfoy sneered. "She's a Mudblood. She should be on her knees cleaning my shoes. That's all Mudbloods are worth!"

Harry's fist snaked out, punching Draco in the nose. "Apologise." He hissed. Malfoy shook his head, taking a step back. Harry took a step forward, his face a mask of anger. "Apologise... now."

Malfoy burbled a quick 'sorry', before turning and dashing down the corridor.

Harry waved his hand, allowing the door to slam shut. He looked at Hermione. "Now do you understand why I said to read that book?"

Hermione nodded slowly. "I..."

"Being Muggleborn, you'll face prejudiced wankers like him a lot in the Wizarding world."

"So..." Hermione looked confused. A cute expression for her, really... "So you don't believe in that then?"

Harry snorted. "God, no. Magic's magic. Doesn't matter if you're from an inbred family like the Malfoys, or you're a first generation."

"So... you weren't being nasty when you gave it to me?" Hermione asked.

"I wouldn't do that to anyone." Harry replied. "It's good preparatory reading material for a first-generation witch or wizard, to see what the old families think." He held out his hand. "I believe we've gotten off on the wrong foot. I'm Harry Potter."

"Hermione Granger." She replied, taking his hand, before realisation struck her. "Harry Potter? I've read about you."

Harry rolled his eyes again. "I bet. You know, none of those people were there that night, nor have I been interviewed by anyone. So, how can they write accurate history books?"

She nodded slowly. "I can see your point."

Harry grinned at her. "Ah... you're a bookworm, like me, aren't you?"

She nodded shyly. "I've... I've never had many friends, so I buried myself in my books." She didn't know why she was being so open with a stranger, but somehow... it felt right.

Harry nodded. "I know how you feel. When I was in primary school, my cousin beat up anyone who tried to be my friend. So, I hid in the books, too." He held out his hand. "Friends?"

Hermione grinned at him, and took his hand again. "Friends."
The two talked for most of the trip, comparing books read and what knowledge they shared.

"So... do you know what house you'll be in?" Hermione asked, gingerly biting into a chocolate frog. As her parents were dentists, they generally didn't like her eating sweets or chocolates. I've known him for two hours, and he's corrupting me already.

Harry pondered for a moment. "Well... my parents were Gryffindors... but, to be honest, I don't think I will be."

"Why not?" She asked, setting the frog down. She chewed thoughtfully, allowing the rich chocolate to melt in her mouth.

"Well... the predominant trait for Gryffindors is bravery." He thought for a moment. "I'm not saying I'm not brave, but I'd like to think I have a modicum of intelligence. Gryffs are generally known for rushing in, where angels fear to tread." He thought again for a moment. "I think I'll be a Ravenclaw. That house is prized for knowledge."

Hermione nodded. "I heard some kids earlier talk about the houses. They said that Slytherin was for the cunning, but I've also heard it's a house of evil."

Harry started sniggering. "It's true that Slytherin's have a bad rep. It's true that a vast number of 'evil' wizards come from Slytherin, but that doesn't make all Slytherins evil. It's actually a house for the cunning and ambitious. Since most 'evil' wizards want power, they're classed as ambitious. And that's why they go into Slytherin."

"What about that other house?" Hermione asked, taking another delicate bite of her chocolate frog.

“Hufflepuff?” Harry asked. “Well, to be honest, it has a bit of a bad reputation itself. People describe it as a dumping ground for the useless and squibs. Those who aren’t brave, ambitious or intelligent. It’s not true.”

“No?”

“No.” Harry replied, smiling softly. “Hufflepuffs value two things; hard work, and loyalty. Most people in Hufflepuff are fairly quiet, buckling down and getting the job done. That’s why they’re poorly represented. ‘Puffs generally work behind the scenes.”

Hermione stared into Harry’s eyes. “What do you think I’ll be?” She asked tentatively.

“Ravenclaw.” Harry answered immediately. “You’ll be a ‘Claw, definitely.”

“How do you know?” Hermione asked, biting down on her bottom lip.

She looks so cute when she does that. Harry thought to himself. “Well... when I look at you, I can see a fierce intelligence burning behind your eyes.” She blushed, and looked down. “I could also see you being a Gryffindor... you’re scared, but you’re still here.”

“What am I scared of?” She whispered, looking down at her lap.

Harry leaned back, and gazed at her. “You’re afraid you won’t fit in.” He replied softly. “You’re worried that people will pick on you, tease you, call you names.”

She nodded.

“You’re also afraid you’ll fail.” Harry said. “You’re afraid that someone will tell you it’s all a big joke, and they’ll send you home.”

She looked up, staring directly at his startlingly green eyes. “How do you know that?” She whispered.

Harry sighed, and ran his fingers through his hair. He looked down. "That's how I feel." He said softly. "I'm terrified that I'll get there... and then be told it's all some cruel joke, and I have to go back to my... relatives."

"And... you don't want that?" Hermione asked, keeping her intense gaze on him.

"No." He said, so softly Hermione had to strain to hear him. She stood, and moved to sit next to him, clumsily wrapping an arm around his shoulders. He looked at her, startled. She was never this forward the first time around.

He leaned into her for a moment, sharing the warmth of the hug. He looked into her eyes, inches from his own. "Thank you."

She smiled warmly at him, sending pleasure up and down his synapses. He felt an overwhelming urge to kiss her, her eleven-year old face merging with the twenty-one year old he'd known. He shook his head, clearing the image before things got confusing.

– CHAPTER FIVE –

The Sorting

The train pulled into Hogsmeade station, prompting organised chaos as hundreds of students rushed off the train, each of them trying to be the first to get to wherever they were going. Harry had stopped Hermione from leaping up as soon as the train stopped.

“Hermione, just wait a few minutes. I don’t particularly fancy getting trampled underneath all that lot.” He said calmly.

Hermione looked out of the window, seeing some thuggish young men, gigantic compared to her and Harry, push their way through crowds of younger students. She nodded. “I suppose so.” She looked back at Harry, biting on her bottom lip. “I don’t want to be late, though.”

Rolling his eyes, Harry held up his hands. “Don’t worry. We’ll be there with plenty of time.” He looked out of the window. “See? The biggest ones have gone already.”

The two got up, and quickly disembarked, hearing a rough voice calling; “First years! First years this way!”

Harry looked up, an unconscious smile on his face as he saw his first friend leading the group of little people to the boats. He turned to Hermione. “Are you scared on going on a boat?” He asked gently.

Hermione shook her head, biting down on her bottom lip. “No. Is that how we get there?”

He nodded. “Yep. First years take the boats across the lake, while the rest of the students take carriages up to the school. It gives them a chance to get there before us, so we can be sorted while they’re all sat down.”

Harry approached Hagrid, smiling warmly at him. “Hey, Hagrid.”

The half-giant looked down, grinning at the child. "Hello, Harry. How was the ride?"

"It was great, Hagrid." He said, gesturing to Hermione. "This is my friend, Hermione Granger."

Hermione smiled shyly, as Hagrid held out a hand to her. She took it, and he gently shook her hand, making sure not to hurt her. "Any friend of Harry's is a friend of mine, Hermione. I'm Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds here at Hogwarts."

"Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hagrid." Hermione said politely.

"Just Hagrid, please." The half-giant replied, letting her hand go. He turned back to the rest of the first-years. "Right, you lot, into the boats. No more than four to a boat."

Harry led Hermione to a boat, seeing a gangly red-haired and a slightly podgy sandy-haired boy get in after them. As soon as everyone was settled, Hagrid let out a cry of 'forward!' and the boats moved as one, sailing slowly though the Black Lake. As they rounded a small island, Harry got his 'first' glimpse of Hogwarts castle.

It was beautiful. Lit up, the whole castle seemed to radiate magic and wisdom. Next to him, Hermione gasped, as she saw the same thing he did.

After disembarking the boats, and sniggering at Ron Weasley who fell in, Harry followed Hagrid up the steps, where a stern-looking woman was stood waiting for them. Professor Minerva McGonagall, Head of Gryffindor House, and Deputy Headmistress.

"The first years, Professor McGonagall." Hagrid said formally.

"Thank you. I'll take them from here, Hagrid." McGonagall said primly. Hagrid turned and stomped away, heading through one of the side doors into the Great Hall.

"Good evening, students." McGonagall began. "My name is Professor McGonagall. In just a few moments, you will be led through these

doors, and be sorted into your house. There are four Houses here at Hogwarts. They are Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw... and Slytherin.” The faint disgust in her voice when she said ‘Slytherin’ made Harry smile.

“While you are at Hogwarts, your house is like your family. Do well, and you will be awarded House points. Any rule-breaking will result in you losing points. At the end of the year, the house with the greatest number of points will win the House Cup.” McGonagall spun on her heel. “Wait here.” She vanished through the doors into the Great Hall, leaving the first years alone for a moment.

Draco Malfoy, still smarting over the rebuke Harry had given him on the train, decided to try and turn the rest of the first years against him.

“So, what they were saying on the train is true.” He said smarmily. “Harry Potter has come to Hogwarts.”

The rest of the first years started chattering amongst themselves, while people started sneaking glances at the rest, trying to figure out which ‘ickle-firstie’ was Harry.

Harry ignored the silly prat, recollecting the first time he came here, and the debate with the Sorting Hat.

Malfoy strutted over, standing directly in front of him. “Well, Potter. Not going to introduce yourself to your adoring fans?”

Harry looked up, gazing disdainfully at Malfoy. “You know, Mr. Malfoy, I don’t have fans. If people want to get to know me, they can have the common courtesy to introduce themselves. Unlike yourself, of course.” He pulled back a sneer. “Didn’t you say on the train that you could teach me all about which families I had to ignore and treat like dirt?”

Malfoy blushed. “I didn’t say that.”

“No.” Harry replied. “You told me that some families, and you meant your own, were better than others. Implying that you are some sort of

superior being.” He sneered. “You’re not, Malfoy. You’re a scared little boy.”

“When my father hears of this-” Malfoy began, his face contorting into childish anger.

Harry stepped closer, invading Malfoy’s personal space. “My message stands, Malfoy!” He hissed. “You tell the Death Eater that spawned you that I will be coming for him!”

Harry turned round, ignoring the sputtering Malfoy, to see the rest of the first years looking at him. Almost everyone knew the name of Malfoy, a prominent Pureblood family, that seemed to consider itself the be-all and end-all of the Wizarding world.

“What?” He snapped, turning to face Hermione, who smiled warmly at him.

McGonagall came back, taking note of the sputtering Malfoy, and gestured to the first years. “This way.”
Harry entered the Great Hall, following the other nervous first years. The first time he’d been here, he’d been terrified with them, but now, he knew better.

McGonagall took a step forward, a long scroll of parchment in her hand. She was about to speak, when the unbelievable happened. The Sorting Hat spoke.

“Before we begin,” The Hat said, “I need to speak to you, Mr. Potter.”

Around the hall, people began whispering to themselves. Various cries of ‘Harry Potter!’, ‘Isn’t he small?’ and ‘What’s the Hat doing?’ sounded around him.

Harry took a step forward, and closed his eyes. To the astonishment of all, Harry began to glow with a pale white light, and began to float six inches off the ground. The Hat followed, glowing with a mix of green, scarlet, yellow and blue light.

So, Mr. Potter... I'm sorry, My Lord. The hat said. You do not belong in this time, or this place.

Things change, Adrian. Harry replied. I've come back to the turn of the tide. Things were going wrong. I'm here to set them straight.

As an heir of Hogwarts, you have the right to command me.

I know that. But, I don't want to 'command' you. I do, however, have some suggestions that may be of use to you in the future.

I will accept them. What about your current group? I sense things are not as they should be.

That would be right. Since we can communicate like this, I'll be able to give you my suggestions.

As you command, my lord.

Harry opened his eyes, the glow fading, as he dropped to the floor. Dumbledore looked on with intense interest as the Sorting Hat spoke to Harry telepathically. He reached out with his Legilimency, only to find two sets of shields in place, one over the Sorting Hat, and an impenetrable set on Harry. He sat back, as the two stopped glowing.

"It shall be done." The hat intoned. Harry nodded once, and took a few steps back, joining the rest of his year-mates.

"What the hell was that?" Ron whispered to Harry, who ignored him.

McGonagall cleared her throat, and raised the parchment. "Abbot, Hannah!" As each student was called, the Sorting Hat's Legilimency crept out to Harry, who would shake his head imperceptibly. Until...

"Granger, Hermione!" The young girl took a few steps forward, and placed the Sorting Hat on her head.

Difficult... a fine mind, plenty of courage... a thirst to prove yourself. The Hat looked at Harry, who nodded slightly. Ravenclaw.

Are you sure?

Yes. She would do well in Gryffindor, but Ravenclaw will suit her better.

"If you're sure..." The Hat intoned. "Ravenclaw!"

Hermione jumped off the stool, took off the hat, and dashed to the Ravenclaw table. She sat down, ignored by her classmates. She tried to keep her face impassive, but couldn't keep the hurt in her eyes masked enough to someone who knew her.

The students passed by again, until it came to his own sorting. "Potter, Harry!"

Dumbledore sat up slightly straighter in his chair, eager to see the new Gryffindor. Even though he hadn't been sorted yet, it was impossible for Harry to go anywhere by Gryffindor. He had seen to that.

Harry stepped forward, and sat on the stool.

So... where do you want to go, my Lord? The hat asked.

Well... how about you read, and give the usual commentary, so that Dumbledore can hear it.

"Hmm... difficult... very difficult. Not a bad mind... there's courage, gracious, such courage... and a thirst... to prove yourself..." The hat muttered. "Cunning... loyalty... intelligence... bravery... what an enigma you are, Mr. Potter."

Ravenclaw, please. Harry sent to the hat. I'll need knowledge to survive, and where else but the home of the intelligent?

"Are you sure? You could be great, you know... it's all here in your head... and Slytherin could help you on your way to greatness."

Dumbledore sent a burst of Legilimency at the hat. It wouldn't do for the saviour of the Wizarding world to be a Slytherin! It would ruin his plans!

The Headmaster doesn't want you to be in Slytherin. The hat said to Harry, amused at Dumbledore's attempt. He's just told me to put you in Gryffindor.

Does he do this often? Harry asked. Interfere with the sorting?

Sometimes. The hat replied stiffly. There have been times he's wanted students in other houses. As Headmaster, I usually have to obey him.

Not today, though. Ravenclaw.

"Not Slytherin, eh?" The hat said, cheering up Dumbledore. "No? Well, if you're sure, better be... Ravenclaw!"

What? Dumbledore was startled. I said Gryffindor! He sent another burst of Legilimency at the Hat, only to be rebuffed.

I will not interfere with this one, Headmaster. The hat replied. He knows both what he wants, and what he needs.

Albus fumed. I know what he needs. For the greater good, he needs to be in Gryffindor!

And who are you to determine the greater good, sir? The hat asked snappily. He is the Chosen One, the prophesised child. He asked for Ravenclaw, and that is where he shall go.

I demand you re-sort him into Gryffindor! I need him with the Weasley boy, to make sure that he doesn't go dark! Albus sent another ragged burst of Legilimency at the hat. Put him into Gryffindor!

The hat ignored him, and carried on with the next student.

Harry went over to the Ravenclaw table, ignoring the people who tried to get his attention. He sat next to Hermione, who looked at him with a pathetically hopeful expression on her face.

"You don't have to sit with me." She whispered, trying not to meet his eyes. "If you want to go and hang out with the cool kids."

Harry snorted. "I am with the cool kid." He whispered back, staring at her intently. "Believe me, I don't want fans. I want a good friend." He reached out, and took her hand under the table. "I'd like it to be you."

She nodded shyly, and squeezed his hand gently. She pulled back, and looked up at the rest of the Sorting. As soon as 'Zabini, Blaise' had been placed into Slytherin, Dumbledore stood up. "There are a few start of term announcements, but we'll get to those later. For the moment..." He raised his hands, the tables filling with food. "Let the feast... begin."

Harry looked over at Hermione, who was looking on with mild shock at the sudden arrival of hundreds of pounds of food. "Hermione." Harry whispered. "Flies." She looked up, blushing, and snapped her mouth closed, before tentatively reaching for a platter of chicken.

Harry loaded up his plate with his favourites, surprising Hermione when he gave himself a balanced meal, including plenty of vegetables. He started to eat, before a sudden thought made him look over his shoulder to the Gryffindor table, when he saw Ron Weasley eating like a pig, food all round his mouth, and several blobs of gravy and potatoes on his tie.

His stomach lurched, and he resolved to avoid the Weasel as much as possible over the next few days. He vividly remembered Ron's attitude and jealousy from the first time round, and decided to simply prevent any encounters with the git.

However, there were others at the Gryffindor table that he did want to 'meet'. The Weasley Twins, for two reasons: one, they were cool, and fun to hang out with; two, they had the Marauder's Map. And he would need that.

He looked over at Hermione, who was silently debating with herself whether or not to have seconds. Harry smiled at her. "Hermione." He whispered. "It's not gonna go anywhere. If you want more, have it."

Harry could almost read her thoughts, the whole 'don't wanna look fat' routine that young girls seemed to go through. He suppressed a chuckle as Hermione's face worked through several emotions, before placing another piece of chicken on her plate, before adding two small roast potatoes.

After the feast had been cleared away, leaving Harry with a single piece of Treacle Tart that he'd managed to grab off his plate before it vanished, Dumbledore stood up to give his speech.

"Welcome, everyone, to a new year at Hogwarts. For our returning students, it's a pleasure to see you again. For our new students, welcome to the finest school of Magic in the world. There are a few rules that I need to pass on to you. The Forbidden Forest, as its name suggests, is strictly off-limits." Dumbledore peered down his nose at the Weasley twins. "Some of our older students would do well to remember this rule. Our caretaker, Mr. Filch, has asked me to remind you that magic is not to be used in the corridors. The list of banned items has now reached a record two hundred and nine items. The entire list can be seen in Mr. Filch's office if you so desire."

He straightened slightly, looking even more formidable. "A final notice. The corridor on the right hand side of the third floor is strictly out of bounds to all students who do not wish to die a most painful death." There was dead silence at this statement, except for Harry who scoffed quietly and rolled his eyes, earning an elbow to the ribs from Hermione.

"Now, prefects, please lead your students to your dormitories. Schedules will be handed out at breakfast tomorrow morning. Good night."

Harry and Hermione followed the rest of the first years through the corridors, on their way to the Ravenclaw Common Room.

Unlike the rest of the Houses, Ravenclaw students didn't have a single password to remember. Since it was the house of the intelligent, each person wanting to enter had to be asked a question or riddle, and if they got it wrong, they had to wait until somebody else came.

The guardian of the entryway was an aristocratic man, who peered down at the students, looking thoroughly unimpressed with the new students.

The fifth year prefect, Penelope Clearwater, stood outside the portrait. "This is the Ravenclaw Common Room entrance. You'll have to answer the portrait's question or riddle to get it." She looked up at the man. "Your question, good sir?" She asked.

The portrait looked down. "Good evening. Your password is a riddle. 'I am golden, Sought by many, When you speak, I am broken, What am I?'"

Penelope looked at the first years. "Anyone want to take a guess?"

Harry scoffed and closed his eyes, shaking his head at the easiness of the question.

"Mr. Potter?" Penelope singled him out. "You seem to find this easy."

"Yes, I do." Harry replied, not opening his eyes.

"Would you care to share your answer with the rest of us?" She asked, already starting to not like the new first year.

"The answer is 'silence'." Harry replied, opening his eyes. "'Silence is golden', it's sought by many, 'cause you can never have enough of it, 'when you speak, it is broken', since you're making noise. So... silence." Harry replied.

The portrait smiled. "Pass." The portrait swung open. The students ambled inside, to see a comfortable room, decorated in blue and bronze, with lots of small couches and tables.

Penelope stood in the centre of the room. "Girls, your dormitories are on the left hand side, while the boys are on the right. Your dorm rooms each have your name on. Your trunks and other possessions should be in your room already."

Harry nodded, then headed up the stairs, after saying a quick goodnight to Hermione. When he got in his dorm, he was delighted to see that Ravenclaw students each got a single dorm room. No more listening to people bloody snoring! He thought delightedly. No more hearing the chainsaw massacre that is Ronald Bloody Weasley and Neville Longbottom.

During the previous time-line, back when he was a Gryffindor, he, Seamus and Dean had decided to play a small prank on Ron and Neville while they were asleep. They had recorded the sound of a motorbike, and played it to coincide with the snores of Ron and Neville. To their utter amazement, the two had soundly slept through the whole thing. After that, the three light sleepers had taken to the game with an amazing display of enthusiasm. They'd each found the loudest, most obnoxious noise they could, and then played it, at full volume.

During the experiment, held at 2am, they'd managed to wake 73 people, out of the 78 in Gryffindor. Since Harry, Dean and Seamus had been awake to perform the test, they'd woken everyone else, who promptly decided to congregate in the sixth year male dorms to voice their displeasure. Ron and Neville had slept through the whole bloody thing, and didn't understand the murderous glances they got the morning after from the rest of the Gryffindors.

Harry shook his head, stopping his musing, before stripping down to his boxers, and climbing into bed. Ah... Hogwarts beds. I've missed this. He closed his eyes, picturing the 21-year old Hermione, before drifting off to sleep.

– CHAPTER SIX –

The Dream

Harry tossed and turned, his tortured mind producing a hodgepodge of dreams, memories and nightmares, all intertwined in a horrific tableau.

Harry entered the train compartment, stopping when he saw Hermione, sat alone, engrossed in the newest edition of *Hogwarts; A History*. She was dressed casually, a t-shirt and jeans, biting on her bottom lip as she learnt some new fact.

Harry sat on the bench opposite her, content for the moment to simply gaze at her. Within moments, she glanced up, looking puzzled at Harry's stare.

"Harry? Is everything all right?" She asked.

Harry nodded. "Can I ask you a question, Hermione? It's a bit... odd."

She snorted. "Harry, over the last six years, we've done a hell of a lot of odd stuff. I doubt your question could be odder than facing Fluffy. Or fighting in the Department of Mysteries."

Nodding, Harry composed his thoughts. "Why have we never gone out?" He could almost hear the mental squeal of brakes as her brain froze.

"W-What?" She asked, her voice trembling.

Harry leaned back, folding his hands in his lap. "Why have you and I never dated?"

"Where the hell did this come from, Harry?" Hermione asked, looking slightly panicked.

"I was sitting, trapped in my room on Privet Drive, pondering life, love and the universe." Harry replied. "I was thinking about my..."

'relationship' with Ginny." Even Hermione could hear the emphasis he placed on the word 'relationship'.

Hermione felt her hackles rising. Oh, god, does he know? She thought to herself.

Harry nodded at the look of understanding on her face. "She dosed me with a love potion, Hermione. Also had a mild intoxication effect. Did you know?"

I'm gonna regret this. She thought sadly. "I figured it out at Dumbledore's funeral." She replied. "She didn't seem all that bothered about you breaking up with her. Then, when I went to the Burrow, I found a couple of bottles of potion, which confirmed it. She wasn't bothered, because she knew she could get you back whenever she wanted."

"And you didn't tell me." He said flatly. "I assume because you didn't know how to tell me."

She nodded again. "How the hell do you tell your best friend that the girl he loves is using him? Trying to gain access to his money and fame. I was planning to dose you with the counter potion, and let it go from there. That way, you could make your own choice while free and clear of the potion. If you wanted to stay with her, you would. If not, you'd break up with her properly." She reached into her robes, and withdrew a small vial. "This is an antidote to Amortentia, Harry."

He nodded, but didn't take the vial. "I've already had one. Got it from the Apothecary in Diagon Alley. Woke me up to quite a few different things."

Hermione cocked an eyebrow, putting the vial back in her robe. "Like what?"

Harry leaned back, crossing his arms. Hermione recognised the body language, meaning that Harry was feeling nervous about whatever he was about to discuss, but was going to get through it. "In my entire life, I've only found six people I knew were showing me their true selves."

“Eh?” Hermione asked, confused by the comment.

“Six people. The three Dursleys. They hated me with a passion, for the simple fact that I’m a wizard. They didn’t put any airs or graces on. Flat-out hatred. I don’t like it, but I can understand it. Next is, oddly enough, Snape. He’s hated me since the day I was born, simply because I was born to his most hated foe. And he’s never hidden that opinion or lied to me about it. Again, I respect him for that. I think the man’s a murdering arsehole who I’m going to kill someday...”

Hermione’s brain transmitted the standard ‘he’s a Professor and should be respected’ speech to her mouth, but she managed to block it, before shrugging and nodding along with him. “That’s four, Harry.” She said softly. “Who’re the others?”

“Number five is Ron.”

“Ron?” Hermione was confused. “But... he’s been...”

“Ever since the day I met him, he’s been jealous. No matter what he’s tried to be since then, he’s always been, and will always be, jealous of the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’. That, and I’m tempted to rip his spleen out through his nostrils for the way he treated you over the summer.”

Hermione nodded. That day at the Burrow would not soon be forgotten. Calling her a cheap, Mudblood whore! The pain in his crotch, according to the twins, had lasted for days.

“Who’s the last?”

“You, Hermione.” Harry replied softly. “You’ve always been supportive. You’ve always been caring. You look after me, for no other reason than you can.” He smiled warmly at her.

Hermione smiled back, resisting the urge to squish him in a big hug. “You’re welcome, Harry.”

He leaned forward slightly. "And so, I've been wondering. Why the hell didn't I think about asking you out? You're beautiful, caring, loving and all-around great."

She blushed prettily. "I... I never thought you'd be interested in me, Harry." She looked down. "I'm not pretty like the other girls in Hogwarts."

Harry nodded. "That's true. You're not."

Hermione felt the rush of hurt. She knew it herself, of course, but to hear Harry confirm it like that...

"Hermione. They're pretty. You, on the other hand, are beautiful. They're clever. You're brilliant." He smiled at her shocked face. "You're the one-eyed man in the kingdom of the blind, Hermione."

She sniffed, using the back of her hand to wipe away a tear.

"I know this is an awful way to ask... but I couldn't think of anything better." He suddenly looked shy. "Hermione... will you be mine?"

She snorted softly. "Harry, you prat." She replied warmly. "I was always yours."

Harry suddenly looked shy. "Then... Can I kiss you?" Unconsciously, he bit on his bottom lip, looking at her with such scared eagerness it left her breathless.

"I'll be very upset if you don't, Harry." Hermione said, launching herself onto his lap.

The scene changed as Harry moaned in satisfaction. The image of Hermione, breathless, eyes shining and her lips puffy from the workout they'd just received, changed into his last memory of her, from the Final Battle.

Hermione ducked under yet another green Killing curse. Harry and her had been pinned down for over a quarter of an hour, as the ragged remnants of the Order battled around them. The wards had

gone up as soon as the warriors for the light had arrived, leaving them no option but to fight. There were even anti-Animagus and anti-Broom wards, ensuring that everyone would stay.

Hermione popped over their ragged shelter, sending off a wave of Reducto curses, before dropping back down.

“Honey?” She said to Harry in a sickly-sweet voice.

Harry popped up, letting out a barrage of explosive and sonic blasts. He pulled a grenade from his vest and threw it, before dropping back down. “Yes, dear?” He asked.

“Why don’t you take me anyplace nice anymore?” She asked, pulling a sonic grenade from her pack, throwing in a casual arc over her shoulder.

Harry looked hurt. “Are you not enjoying yourself, darling?” He asked in a mock-hurt tone. “I’m upset. I arrange for all these nice people to come and entertain us, and all you do is complain.”

Hermione grabbed Harry by his shirt, pulled him down, and kissed him roughly. For a moment, he was cross-eyed, as his wife ravaged his mouth. He shook his head. “Well... yeah, we could have stayed home and done that instead.”

Harry suddenly stiffened, crying out in agony, his hand flying up to his scar. “He’s here!” He hissed. “Run!”

Ignoring her husband’s feverish ranting, as she called any attempt to get her to leave a fight, she popped up, firing off another wave of curses. She saw Voldemort appear at the edge of the apparition wards, and stroll through casually.

“Yep. He’s here.” She said casually. “Doesn’t look too happy, either.” Her tone was nonchalant, but no-one had been able to stand up to Voldemort directly. Not even Harry, who had been marked as his equal two decades before.

Harry shook his head, using his Occlumency skills to drive the pain away. "You should go, babe. I've got a bad feeling about this."

She rolled her eyes, ducking down when an explosion hex hit the wall they were hiding behind. "Harry, you always have a bad feeling about this. You wouldn't be you if you didn't. In the last dozen fights, you've told me to run, and did I?"

"No." Harry grudgingly replied. "But, I have a really bad feeling about this one."

"Thirteen?" Hermione giggled. "Come on, Harry."

The wall the two were hiding behind was vaporised in a massive blast, throwing the two into the air, to slump into the ground, barely conscious.

"That was fun." Harry groaned, as he rolled over. He spied his wand sitting a few feet away, fortunately intact after the blast. He reached out to pick it up... only to pull his hand away as the faithful wand burst into flames. Harry looked up to see Voldemort, barely six feet away, sneering at him.

Hermione flicked her eyes open, everything bleary for a few moments. She looked up, to see Death incarnate standing in front of her.

"You know, I was going to torture you, Mudblood." Voldemort said in a soothing tone. "But, I think I'll just kill you." He raised his wand. "Avada Kedavra!" The green light hit her, and Hermione Potter was no more.

Harry watched the light hit Hermione, and saw her collapse to the ground, dead. He let out in incoherent bellow of pain and rage, as he crab-walked over to her, grasping her lifeless body in his arms. For a few moments, pain, overwhelming, soul-destroying pain filled his every sense, only to be washed away in ice-cold flames.

It was at that point that Harry James Potter, the 'Boy-Who-Lived', the Chosen One, found 'the power the Dark Lord knows not'. And it

wasn't love, as Dumbledore had preached to him a decade ago. It wasn't compassion, or mercy, or decency.

It was rage. It was pain. It was anger. It was justice. It was vengeance! Harry gently placed her body down on the ground, before standing, turning and facing Voldemort.

"Oh, sorry, Harry." Voldemort's cultured voice grated on his ears. "I'd almost forgotten you were here. Shame about your little whore. Don't worry, though. You'll be joining her soon."

"No." Harry's voice was different. Melodic. A harmony. As if it was thousands of voices, merged into one. "Your time is over, Tom Riddle."

Voldemort snarled at hearing his true name, raising his wand and throwing another Killing Curse. It washed over the body of the 'Boy-Who-Lived', before blinking away.

"You cannot kill us, Tom." The collective voice replied calmly. "We are truth. We are justice. We are revenge!" Harry took a step forward, his body crackling with power. "We are the Fallen. Those who you have killed. We wield this body, so that you will die." Harry's hand raised, glowing with light, a pure, white magic. "You want power, Tom?" The voice asked. "We will give you power." A beam of light seared out, savagely impacting Voldemort, burning through his robes.

All around them, the battle stopped after the hoarse cry of Voldemort sang out. The white light, the light of pure magic, fuelled by the thirst for revenge of thousands of souls, the newest of these belonging to Hermione Potter, burning through Voldemort, destroying the dark magic he had used to prolong his life, the rituals coming undone in the blink of an eye.

"Vengeance has come to you, Tom, and found you lacking." Harry's multi-voice called out. "It's time for your evil to end." The white light hit the Dark Mark on Voldemort's arm, connecting him to every other Death Eater. Each of them were engulfed in white flames, destroying the bodies of the evil minions.

Voldemort's body shook in rage, confusion, fear and agony. "You should have died that night twenty years ago, Tom." The voice called out, before switching to Harry's own. "We both should have. All the pain would have ended then." The white light increased, destroying the final traces of magic in Riddle's body. Ever since he had been resurrected back in '95, Voldemort's body was comprised of dark magic and a few body parts. The thigh bone of his father. The hand of Peter Pettigrew. And the blood of Harry James Potter. Without the magic to sustain it, the body collapsed.

Harry dropped to his knees, letting the barrage stop. Voldemort's ravaged body dropped at the same time, laying on the ground, not even a twitch. Harry turned away, conjuring up a large blanket, which he used on Hermione, tucking it right up to her chin.

Lieutenant Dean Thomas, one of the last survivors of Hogwarts, gingerly came over, avoiding the fallen body of the Dark Lord like the plague. He saw Harry laying the blanket over the body of his wife.

"Harry?" He asked quietly.

"She never liked the cold." Came the murmured reply, as he tucked the blanket neatly around her.

"Harry, she's dead." Dean said bluntly.

Harry looked up, his face expressionless. "I know that, Dean." He smoothed her hair down. "I don't want her to be cold in the afterlife." He whispered. He conjured a large, clean white sheet, which he used to cover her upper body and face.

Harry sat up, sweat pouring from his body, trembling from the nightmare he'd just experience.

"No." He said out loud. "It won't happen that way again." He forced his clenched fists open, noting absently the crescent shaped marks from his nails. "I won't let it happen that way again."

– CHAPTER SEVEN –

Flying Lesson

“Good morning, class.” Madam Hooch strode forward, passing by the students. She stopped when she reached the head of the column. “Welcome to your first flying lesson.” She gestured to the brooms. “Well, what are you all waiting for? Place your hand over a broom, and say ‘up!’”

Harry held his hand over the broom, and watched impassively as it leapt into his hand. He was the first, and only, student to have this happen straight away. Hermione glared at him, jealous at his quick pick-up of the material.

He looked at her, shouting at the broom to rise. He allowed his to float freely, and went to stand behind her. “Hermione.” She stopped her shouting, and looked at him. “Let me ask you something. Did you ever have a dog, when you were younger?”

She looked at him, curious as to this apparent random comment. “Yeah, I had a dog when I was a kid.”

Harry nodded. “Okay... when you wanted the dog to do something, did you bellow at it, or coax it?”

Hermione looked at her broom for a moment. “Up.” She commanded in a firm tone. The broom leapt into her hand, and stayed perfectly still.

Harry looked back at his, and grinned cheekily. “Sit.” He commanded. The tail-end of the broom lowered to the ground. “Lie down.” The broom’s nose sunk down, leaving the broom flat on the ground. Harry could almost see an eager puppy, waiting to please it’s master.

“Up.” The broom leapt into his waiting hands. The rest of the class were giving him incredulous looks, as he commanded a broom like no other.

“Mr. Potter?” Madam Hooch looked over at him.

“Yes, Madam Hooch?” Harry responded politely.

“I’ve never seen anyone able to command a broom like that before.” Even she, with her countless hours of experience, could not do such a thing.

Harry grinned rakishly, making several girls’ hearts melt. “It must just be my natural charm, Madam.”

Even Hooch wasn’t immune to Harry’s charm, and felt her cheeks blush slightly. “Must be.” She cleared her throat, trying to get the blush under control. “Since you seem to be the most natural at this, would you care to show us what you can do?”

Harry nodded, leapt onto the broom, and shot into the sky. For the next few minutes, everyone was in awe at the manoeuvres Harry was able to make the old broom perform. “What the devil?” Hooch was stunned as she saw the broom start to tailspin, falling to the ground faster and faster. She had her wand in hand when the broom smoothly pulled up, and she heard Harry’s fierce cry of glee, as the broom sailed over the grass at a height of less than two feet. He brought the broom about, and slowed as he approached the crowd of students.

Hooch was in awe. “I’ve never seen anyone ride a broom like that, Mr. Potter... Even your father couldn’t do that.”

Harry cocked his head. “My father, ma’am? He was a good flier?”

“Don’t you know, Mr. Potter?” Hooch asked, curious as to why he didn’t know.

“It’s in your blood, Harry.” Hermione said softly, from just behind him. “Your Dad was a chaser for Gryffindor.”

“Huh.” Harry said. “Well... I never knew that.”

Hooch grinned at him. "I think I'll be having a word with Professor Flitwick, Mr. Potter." Her grin widened. "With such natural talent, you'll be a natural at Quidditch."

Hermione grinned at him, and shyly took his hand. "First years never make the house teams, Harry!" She smiled at him, making her face come alive.

Damn it! Does she have to look so bloody cute? Harry thought to himself, while gently squeezing her hand. "Won't that interfere with my studies, ma'am?"

Hooch waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. "I'm sure something could be worked out, Mr. Potter." She started to walk away, checking on the other students.

"What about you, Hermione?" Harry asked softly, very aware she hadn't let his hand go.

She looked up at him shyly. "Uh... I don't think I'll be a very good flier, Harry."

"Why?" He saw the nervousness in her eyes. "Are you afraid of heights?"

She looked at him. "Uh... n-no... Okay, yes, I am." She started biting on her bottom lip.

Don't do that! Harry mentally screamed, valiantly resisting the urge to start nibbling on her bottom lip. God damn it, I'm eleven, and I'm starting to get hormones! Bloody puberty! He started to pull her towards his broom. "Come on. Let's see what we can do about that."

"Madam Hooch?" Harry called over to the instructor.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Ma'am, Hermione's afraid of heights. Is it okay if I take her up with me?" Harry asked, turning on the charm, and adding puppy-dog eyes.

Hooch relented. "Can you handle flying for two, Mr. Potter?"

"I think so, ma'am." Harry replied, switching from 'puppy-dog' to 'aw, shucks' eyes. "I didn't have a problem when it was just me."

Hooch nodded. While it wasn't officially policy, Harry had shown in two minutes that he could handle a broomstick better than she could. "Very well. Please be careful though, Mr. Potter."

"Of course, ma'am." Harry picked up the broom, and held it out to Hermione. "Come on. We'll go up together."

Hermione shook her head in panic. "I can't, Harry."

Harry physically picked her up, and plopped her onto the broom. "Yes, you can. And you will." He climbed on the broom behind her, and took her right hand in his left. "Now, grab onto the broom with your left hand." Hermione followed the order, placing a shaking left hand onto the rough wood of the broom. Harry leaned forward, close enough to smell her hair, and grasped the broom with his right hand.

"Now, we're both going to be in control." He squeezed her hand, resting his head on her shoulder. "Just relax. Remember, the broom is your puppy, and it'll do what you want it to. Just remember, we're the ones in control."

She nodded shakily, and pulled her left hand slightly. The broom lifted off the ground, rising slowly into the air.

Harry used his hand to pull the broom slightly higher, increasing both acceleration and height. He looked at his travelling companion, sniggering slightly. "Hermione, open your eyes."

She did, seeing she was high up. She squealed, and slammed her eyes shut.

Okay... she'll never learn if she won't open her eyes. Hmm... Harry thought for a moment. Ooh! The lake! He leaned slightly, letting the broom bank gently. Hermione let out another squeal as the broom started to accelerate.

Harry leaned closer, and whispered into her ear. "I've got you, Hermione. I won't let you fall with me. If you do fall, I'll always be there to catch you."

Hermione, without opening her eyes, turned her head towards him. "You promise?"

Harry nodded, laughing silently. "I promise, Hermione. I'll never let you fall." He slowed the broom down, as he approached the lake. For a few moments, he steered gently, trying to get into the best position, before cutting the momentum altogether. "Hermione?"

"Hmm?" She breathed back.

"We're here."

"Where?" Hermione asked, still keeping her eyes closed.

"Hermione, open your eyes. Please, trust me." The gentle pleading in his voice tugged on her heart strings, damn it! She opened her eyes, and gasped.

The two were five hundred feet above the lake, but Hermione didn't notice the height. In front of them was Hogwarts castle, the sunlight behind it, causing the whole building to glow orange. There was a reflection of the building in the lake, the scene one of incredible beauty.

"Wow!" Hermione gasped again. "Harry, it's beautiful!" She looked over her shoulder at him. "How did you know where to come?"

Harry just smiled at her. "It's what we saw when we came across the lake, remember? The castle at night, all those lights. A shining beacon... all alone, in the night. Well, this is the daytime view. I thought you'd enjoy it."

"I am." She leaned back into his chest. "Thanks, Harry."

Harry squeezed her hand again. "Anytime, Hermione. Anytime." He pulled his hands free, and wrapped them around her waist, causing her to squeal slightly. "You ready to fly us back?"

Hermione shook her head quickly. "No, Harry, what if I get it wrong?"

"Hermione..." Harry chuckled in her ear, his breath making her shudder slightly. "Don't think about it. Just feel. You can do this."

She nodded, sucking up her courage, and tentatively placed both hands on the broom. She pushed forward, gently accelerating and lowering their altitude. Harry closed his eyes, letting the wind, and Hermione's bushy hair, hit his face.

Ah... this is the life. He thought, not noticing Hermione glance over her shoulder at him, a gentle smile tugging on her lips.

He's enjoying this. Hermione mused. This is kinda fun. "Harry?"

"Mm?" He moaned.

"Do you think... could we do this again sometime?" She asked softly.

Harry chuckled again. "Whenever you want, Hermione." He squeezed her waist gently, sending goosebumps down her arms.

"Okay." She whispered, gently guiding the broom back towards Madam Hooch and the rest of the first years.

In the castle, several people were following the flight were awe, amusement, and chuckles at the romance.

Flitwick and McGonagall, both on free periods, watched the two.

"They remind me of his parents." Flitwick mused, watching the two gently fly back.

"A hundred galleons they'll be married when they graduate." McGonagall said, feeling her old heart mellow at the sight. "They're

young now... when their hormones kick in, they'll be the Golden Couple of Hogwarts."

Flitwick looked up at her, taking another sip of his tea. "Are you betting they'll marry when they graduate, or by the time they graduate?"

McGonagall thought for a moment. "I believe they'll marry after they graduate. James and Lily married straight out of school."

Flitwick held out his hand. "Deal. I believe they'll already be married by the time they graduate."

The two teachers shook hands, sealing the deal.

Hermione guided the broom onto the grass, before pulling to a stop a few metres away from Hooch. Even though Hermione was a young girl, that short flight was about the most romantic thing she'd done.

Harry opened his eyes as the two came in to land. He released her waist, hearing her make a slight 'mew' sound, and smiled to himself.

"That was fun." Hermione said, beaming over at him. "I really enjoyed that, Harry. Thank you."

He smiled at her, a warm grin on his face that was entirely unforced. "I love flying." He whispered. "Up there, we're all free. There's no baggage. No expectations." He looked up, unaware of the dreamy look on Hermione's face. "There's yourself, nature, and freedom." He shook his head, walking away, ignorant of the looks he was receiving from the rest of his class.

– CHAPTER EIGHT –

Potions Class

Harry had to suppress a smirk all through breakfast. Today was the first potions lesson with Snivellus... no, Professor Snape. Hermione was idly flicking through her potions textbook, curious as to how it would go.

“So... first potions lessons, Harry?” Cho asked from across the table.

“Yep.” Harry replied idly. “Looking forward to it.” He gestured at Hermione’s textbook. “It’s a fascinating subject, isn’t it?”

Cho rolled her eyes. “It would be, if it wasn’t for Snape.”

Hermione’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline, a rebuke on her lips about disrespecting a professor, when a hand on her arm from Harry silenced her.

“Oh?” Harry asked calmly. “Is there a problem with Professor Snape?”

Cho rolled her eyes again. “Yes. He’s an evil, greasy git who hates anyone that isn’t in Slytherin.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s not true.” Hermione said quietly. “Maybe he was just having a bad day.”

Snorting, Cho giggled. “A bad day that lasted every day for the whole school year?” She shook her head. “Nope, he just hates anyone who isn’t in Slytherin.”

“How do you know?” Harry asked, squeezing Hermione’s arm gently.

“We had potions lessons with the Slytherins last year.” Cho replied. “They mix and match who goes with who. From what I’ve heard, for your year it’s Slytherin/Gryffindor, and Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff, while my year has Slytherin/Ravenclaw.” She sighed, and slumped down in her seat. “It’s pathetic. You should have seen it. One of the Slytherins

blew up his cauldron, and he blamed Marietta for it! He docked fifty points, fifty points, from her for sabotaging his potion! It was an outrage.”

Harry thought back to his first potion lesson in the original time-line, and suppressed a smile. He knew how petty Snape was. “I’m sure we’ll be fine, Cho.” Harry said confidently. “Thanks for the ‘heads-up’, though.”

Harry and Hermione had entered the Dungeon, and sat in the front row, both eager to learn the fascinating subject of Potions. Of course, Harry was eager to take Snape down a peg or two, but he wouldn’t mind learning Potions as well, you know... as a little thing on the side.

The door slammed open, admitting Snape, who tore through the room, his cape flapping behind him.

“There will be no foolish wand-waving in this class.” He got to his desk, and spun round, fixing his beady glare on all students. “As such, I don’t expect many of you to appreciate the subtle science and exact art that is potion making, or even to recognise it as magic at all.” His glare fixed on Harry, who smiled warmly at him. “However... for those with the... disposition... I can teach you how to ensnare the senses and bewitch the mind. I can teach you how to brew glory, bottle fame, and even put a stopper... in death.”

Hermione glanced down to see that Harry had already written Snape’s entire speech down, verbatim. And he hadn’t even picked up his pen. She glanced at him, curiosity on her face.

Snape took a step forward. “Mr. Potter. Our new... celebrity.” He smiled malevolently. “Tell me, what would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?”

Without missing a beat, Harry responded. “Depending on the quantities involved, Professor, an explosion potentially large enough to destroy Hogwarts.” He smiled. “However, if you were to add a stabilising agent, such as powdered belladonna, or maybe even crystallised moonstone, you would have a rudimentary form of the sleeping potion known as the Draught of Living Death.”

Snape sneered. "Where would you look if I asked you to find me a Bezoar?"

Harry grinned, and pointed to the Potions Store cupboard at the front of the room.

Snarling, Snape took another step forward. "And if there were none there, Potter?"

"Oh. You meant where do Bezoars come from?" Harry asked, smiling innocently. "Why didn't you say that, Professor?" He had to suppress the smirk that was threatening to erupt onto his face. "A Bezoar is found in the stomach of a goat, sir." He decided to push a little further. "It's also a common antidote to most poisons." He smiled disarmingly at Snape. "But, since we don't have to worry about being poisoned in your classroom, sir, I'm not worried if we run out of Bezoars."

Snape growled, actually growled, at Harry. "And what is the difference between monkshood and Wolfsbane?"

Harry shrugged slightly. "The name." He grinned. "It's also called 'aconite', Professor. Didn't you know that?"

Snape snapped. "That'll be fifty points from Ravenclaw from being a know-it-all smart arse, Potter!" He snapped viciously. "How dare you question me?"

Harry smiled innocently, ignoring the glares from his fellow Ravenclaws at losing so many points during his first lesson. Harry, however, had a plan.

He stood up, and straightened his shoulders. "Point adjudication request by the Board." He said firmly.

Snape looked confused at him. "What the devil are you blithering on about now, Potter?" He snapped.

A soft feminine voice spoke out into the classroom. "Identify." The voice commanded.

“Potter, Harry James, Ravenclaw House, first year student.” Harry replied.

“Specify nature of adjudication.” The voice said.

“During my first potions lessons, Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master, removed points from Ravenclaw House for answering his questions correctly. Said questions were not from the first year syllabus.”

There was silence for a moment, as everyone, including Snape, stared at Harry. Harry, however, was immune to the stares, waiting patiently. “Adjudication confirmed.”

Harry smiled, and sat down again, ignoring the questioning looks he got from Hermione.

“What was that, Potter?” Snape demanded, coming over to Harry, and standing directly in front of him. Harry had to resist the urge to wrinkle his nose at the smell coming from the Professor. Christ, hasn’t this guy heard of breath-mints? I can just see it now... “Tic-tac, Professor? Two hours of minty freshness, with only two calories!” Probably wouldn’t go down too well.

“What was what, sir?” Harry asked, smiling innocently.

“Detention, Potter!” Snape snapped, turning on his heel. He made his way over to the blackboard.

“For what, Professor?” Harry asked, still smiling innocently.

“For your cheek, Potter!” Snape snarled, resolving to ignore the little brat.

Harry stood up again, ignoring the pulling on his sleeve from Hermione. “Adjudication request by the Board.” Harry called out.

“Identify.” The soft voice called out again.

“Potter, Harry James, Ravenclaw House, first year student.” Harry replied.

“Specify nature of adjudication.” The voice said.

“Invalid detention assigned to a student by Potions Master Severus Snape.” Harry replied, ignoring the puce-colour Snape was turning. “Detention was assigned for ‘cheek’ after answering the Potions Master’s questions.”

“Potter!” Snape snarled, drawing his wand.

“Adjudication confirmed.” The voice said.

“What was that?” Snape demanded, waving his wand threateningly.

Harry smirked. “I thought there wasn’t any foolish wand-waving in this class, Professor?”

“Out!” Snape roared. “All of you, get out! And that will be one hundred points from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff!”

The students grabbed their bags and dashed out of the door. Harry leaned against the wall outside the dungeon, taking a deep breath and smiling at the rest of the class. As expected, they were less than pleased with him.

“What the bloody hell are you doing, Potter?” Boot demanded, grabbing Harry by the elbow.

Snape came scurrying out of the dungeon, robes billowing, ignoring the class as he rushed away.

Hannah Abbott joined Terry. “You just cost us a hundred points!”

Harry shook his head. “No, I didn’t. Go and check the counters. You’ll see they haven’t been affected.” One of the Hufflepuff boys, Harry didn’t know who, dashed away, going to the House Point counters located just outside the Great Hall.

Terry released Harry, and stood a few feet away, glaring at Harry nastily. Hermione came and stood next to him.

“What did you do?” She whispered. She, too, was upset by the loss of that many points so early in the year.

Harry grinned at her. “I’ll tell you in a minute, when they come back.” He smiled his ‘aw, shucks’ grin. “Trust me, you’ll like it.”

The boy came rushing back, breathing heavily and alarmingly red-faced. He leaned forward, hands on his knees, as he tried to get his breath back. “It’s true!” He gasped. “We haven’t lost any points.”

Harry stood up, and dusted off his robes. “We though here?” He asked Terry and Hannah, who nodded dumbly. “Good.” He held out his arm to Hermione. “Shall we retire to the Common Room, Miss Hermione?”

She shrugged, and laced her arm through his. “Lead on, good sir.”

The two calmly left, leaving the other students pondering the same thing: What the hell was going on?

Once back in the Common Room, Harry led Hermione to his dorm room, and shut the door. As expected, Hermione erupted into rapidly-asked questions.

“What the hell was that, Harry?” She asked. “What did you do to him? What’s an ‘adjudication request’?”

Harry dropped onto his bed, and patted the duvet next to him, inviting her to sit down. She sat down tentatively, aware that she was in a boy’s room.

“Have you read the teacher’s code of conduct?” He asked.

She was disarmed by the odd question. “No. I didn’t know there was one.”

Harry nodded. “I found an old copy at Flourish and Blotts when I was doing my school shopping. It’s basically a list of guidelines that they

are required to follow.” He ran his fingers through his hair, distracting Hermione for a moment. “It includes sections on punishments, such as point removals and the assigning of detentions. In the old days, if a teacher gave an unfair detention, the student could request that the punishment be looked into by a higher-ranking teacher.”

Hermione’s mouth pursed into a small ‘O’. “So... you requested that the points he removed be checked out by someone else?”

Harry nodded. “Sort of. I actually requested adjudication by the Board of Governors, so I’ll need to submit my request in writing to them.” He grinned at her. “It also has the fortunate side-effect of ensuring that Snape can’t give or take any points until the adjudication process is complete. Same with detentions.”

Hermione thought it over. “So, you’ve made him toothless.”

“Yep.” Harry grinned again. “I’ve removed the fangs from the Head Snake.” He leaned back on the bed, lying down. Hermione followed, lying next to him. “Not bad for a Thursday.”

Another Note from the Author: I have the next few chapters ready to be sent to Beta. They should be uploaded within the next few days.

A Question for you: Don't you just hate people who refuse to post a new chapter unless they receive a certain number of reviews? I know I do...

– CHAPTER NINE –

More Weasleys

The afternoon passed slowly, since half of the first years had been ejected from their Potions Lesson. Harry and Hermione, sticking with the Ravenclaw mind-set, read through the Potions textbook, consulting frequently with 1001 Magical Herbs and Fungi, as they read through what would have been the days' lesson.

After writing an essay about a simple potion to cure boils, something Harry knew would be due the next lesson, the two decided to head down to the Great Hall for dinner. Once again, Harry held out his arm in the 'gentlemanly' fashion, which Hermione took with a blush and a faint giggle.

On their way to the Great Hall, the two were approached by a pair of red-headed twins. When Harry looked up and saw them coming, a look of pure panic erupted onto his face, causing Hermione to discretely pull out her wand.

One of the approaching red-heads noted Harry's look, and tapped on his twin's arm. "What's wrong with him?"

Harry grasped Hermione's hand. "Hermione, do you see two red-headed demons approaching us?" He asked theatrically.

Fred and George grinned as one, as they quickened their pace.

Hermione looked at the two approaching teens. "I don't know if I'd call them demons, Harry." She said snootily. "Maybe fiends, or miscreants, but not demons."

Fred elbowed George gently. "They've heard of us, brother mine!"

Harry pulled on Hermione's hands. "Run!" He bellowed, staring to pull Hermione along with him. "Run from Hell's Carrots!"

Hermione, baffled, shrugged her shoulders and ran, chasing after Harry, who still had hold of her hand. They belted down the Charms

corridor, before Harry pulled them into an alcove just before a large portrait.

Hermione, very aware she was in almost full-body contact with Harry, looked up into his eyes, breathing deeply.

“Harry, what the hell are we doing?” She whispered, leaning close to him.

“Hang on a minute, Hermione.” Harry whispered back, pointing at the large portrait. A moment later, the portrait opened, revealing two Weasleys, holding a battered piece of parchment.

Harry raised his wand, sending a silent Accio at the parchment, catching it as he stepped out of the alcove. “Thank you, gentlemen.” He said, folding the parchment. “So... the infamous Weasley twins.” He held out a hand. “Word has it you’re the second greatest pranksters in Hogwarts history.”

Fred stepped forward, a little wary of the first year who had bested them. “How do you know who we are?” He asked, sending a silent glance at George.

Harry smiled. “Well, the red hair gives it away.” He said, smiling. Harry held up the piece of parchment. “The fact that you’re carrying one of the only relics of the greatest pranksters tells me that you’re the second best.”

George drew his wand. “You seem to know an awful lot for a first year, Potter.” He said calmly.

Harry nodded once. “Yes, I do.” He reached out and took Hermione’s hand. “Shall we step into your office, gentlemen? All shall be revealed.”

Fred shrugged, and opened the portrait hole, before scampering inside, followed by the other three.

Once inside the tunnel, Harry lit his wand, sitting down on the dusty floor. “I think proper introductions are in order. I’m Harry Potter, and

my beautiful, charming companion here is Miss Hermione Granger.” He gestured at Hermione, who blushed prettily.

“I’m Fred.” One of the twins said.

“I’m George.” The other added.

“We’re the Weasley twins.” They completed together.

“I know.” Harry said, laughing. Even after all these years, any conversation with the twins was funny. He held up the parchment. “I must admit, gentlemen, I’m curious as to how you got hold of this.”

“Nicked it.” Fred said, casually. “How do you know what it is?”

Harry placed the parchment on the floor, tapping it with his wand. “I solemnly swear I’m up to no good.”

“How’d you know the password?” George asked.

Harry just smiled, and pointed at the parchment, where the opening words were filling in.

Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs, purveyors of magical mischief, welcome you to the Marauder’s Map.

Harry kept his wand on the parchment. “Good day, gentlemen.”

The other three live people watched as the wording on the parchment started to change. George glanced at Fred. It had never done this for them.

Mr. Padfoot would like to ask if we have a new user.

Mr. Moony confirms Mr. Padfoot’s question, and would like to know your name.

Harry just smiled. “I am sometimes known as ‘Pronglet’.”

Mr. Prongs would like to ask if you are related to any of the Marauders.

Mr. Wormtail concurs with Mr. Prongs' question, and would like to know your name.

"I am the son of Prongs." Harry said, glancing up at the two Weasleys, who's mouths had opened in shock.

Mr. Prongs would like to welcome his noble off-spring to the Marauder's Map.

Mr. Padfoot would also like to welcome the newest Marauder, and ask how the devil Mr. Prongs managed to reproduce.

Harry chuckled. "Well, once upon a time, my mummy and daddy were in love, and one quiet evening..."

Mr. Moony requests that you do not reveal the gory details of Mr. Prongs' love-life.

Mr. Padfoot would like to know when Mr. Prongs got a love-life.

Mr. Wormtail confirms his disbelief, and concurs with Mr. Moony to not poison us with the details.

Mr. Prongs would like to ask Mr. Padfoot, Mr. Moony and Mr. Wormtail to sod off while he talks with his son.

Harry chuckled at the in-built insults, before looking up at the Weasleys. "Does that answer your questions, Fred, George?"

"You're the son of a Marauder." George started.

"The son of Prongs." Fred finished.

"Wicked." The two gasped together.

Harry looked over at Hermione, who was watching with a faintly puzzled air. He took pity on her. "Hermione, this map is a miracle of

charms work.” He opened it up, pointing to a certain passage, where four tiny little names hovered. “It shows the location of everyone in Hogwarts. Look,” He pointed to the Ravenclaw dorm rooms. “It shows everyone in our dorm.” He looked over. “Percy and Ron,” He looked up at the Weasleys, “are in the Gryffindor Common Room.”

He laughed. “Snape’s stalking around his dungeon. Probably upset...”

“From what we’ve heard about you, little Harrikins-” The twin on the left started.

“It’s your fault he’s upset.” The other twin finished. Even with all his future knowledge, he couldn’t tell the damned Weasley twins apart. It didn’t help that their own mother couldn’t tell her spawn apart.

Harry bowed theatrically. “Thank you.” He said, looking smug. “Honestly, the rumours that float about this place... If we could harness them into a source of power, we’d be able to travel all over the world in a second.”

Hermione added her two cents. “The only two things to travel faster than light. Starships and gossip.”

Harry looked over, one eyebrow arched. “You’re a Trekker, Hermione?” He asked.

“Yep.” She replied, giggling at the total incomprehension on the twins faces. “We’ll talk about that later.”

“Of course.” Harry said, for a moment imagining her older self in a uniform from the Original Series. Especially the boots... He shook his head, filing the image into ‘look, but never touch, especially while in school’ category. He looked back at the Weasley twins. “So, gentlemen, I hate to ask it of you, but could I keep the map?”

Fred looked at George, an entire conversation held in a moment with just glances. “Shouldn’t be a problem, Harry, old man,”

“Of course, we may need to borrow it from time to time.” George concluded.

"Please, stop that." Hermione said, looking from one twin to another. "It's like watching a tennis match."

"Ah, but that's part of the fun, Hermione!" Harry said, cackling like a fool. Both Fred and George took a subtle step back from the new lunatic, exchanging glances with each other and Hermione. Harry caught the glances, and settled down immediately. "Fine." He pouted. "You spoil all my fun."

Hermione cuffed him on the arm gently, before turning back to the Weasley twins. "So, what's the deal with your brother?"

"Which one?" The twins asked in stereo.

"Ron." Hermione said, not noticing Harry stiffen slightly next to her, before he forced himself to relax. "He seems a bit... weird."

Harry snorted, sorting through his memories of the previous time-line. Ron was beyond weird. He was a complete prat, who deserved a good killing for his behaviour.

Fred and George looked at each other. "Ron's always been a bit... odd." George finally said. "He seems to have a bit of an inferiority complex."

Harry couldn't resist. No, he doesn't have an inferiority complex. He's simply inferior. He began to muse. I suppose after Bill, the successful Curse-Breaker, Charlie, the successful beast-master, Percy, the perfect brown-nosing little sycophant, and Fred and George, the perfect pranksters/inventors, there was nothing good left to pass on to Ron. At least Ginny got some good looks. And they weren't too bloody hot, either. Harry was dragged back from his thoughts by the others staring at him. "What?" He asked.

Hermione giggled at him. "We were just asking your opinion, and you looked to be a million miles away."

No... just six years up-stream. "Sorry, was just lost in thought. What were you asking?"

Fred spoke up. "Ron told us that he was looking for you on the train, but he couldn't find you. Were you hiding?"

Yes. "No." Harry replied, mustering up his 'innocent deer-in-headlights' look. "I was talking with Hermione for the whole trip. The only visitor we got was this little albino ferret."

"Malfoy." The Weasleys said together. "The son of Lucius Malfoy." Fred added.

"He already told us that we were disgraces to the name of wizard." George said.

Harry snorted, closely followed by Hermione. "He's a little shit who should be sterilised for the good of the human race." Harry said, smiling at Hermione. "He came up to us in our compartment on the train, called us all Mudbloods. I stood up to him, watched him nearly piss himself, then run away."

"And?" Hermione asked, looking at Harry with a slightly disapproving air.

"Well..." Harry looked over, giving her a repentant little smile. "I might have broken his nose, too." He grinned at Fred and George, who had matching grins. "Just a little bit."

Fred and George each extended a hand. Figuring to save time, Harry took both of their hands at once and shook. "Anyway, no, we didn't see Ron on the train."

"He did try to speak to you during the Sorting." Hermione added.

Yes, and I ignored the little prick. "I was having a chat with the Hat. That was more important."

"One would get the impression that you don't like our little brother." Fred said, staring at Harry with a frankly terrifying gaze.

Harry cocked his head, biting down on his lip for a moment. "Well... he's not exactly made a good first impression." Harry said diplomatically. "I mean, when he tried to speak to me during the Sorting, he was piss wet through. He fell in the lake during our crossing." And I will never admit that I may have pushed him using a little wandless magic. Not even under the threat of the Cruciatus. "And, when I looked over during the feast..."

"Say no more." George said immediately. "His eating habits, at home at least, are legendary."

That's one thing you could call it. Harry thought. He didn't answer, though.

"But, he's a whiz at Wizard's chess." Fred said. "No-one's been able to beat him for years. He's dead good at strategy."

Why does everyone think that being good at chess makes Ron a good strategist? Harry thought, secretly amused that 'being good at chess' was the only redeeming feature of their youngest male sibling. A game that has very set rules, no room for improvisation and specific moves for each piece... and because he's good at that, that makes him a battle-master. Hah!

"Well... don't get me wrong..." Hermione began delicately. "Chess... while an enjoyable pass-time... it's not exactly going to serve him well in the future." Hermione was secretly amused that Ron's brothers could only come up with one remotely good thing about their brother. And that was pretty naff, too.

Fred and George looked at each other, and shrugged. "It could be worse." They said in unison.

"How?" Harry asked, fearing the answer.

"Well, 'ittle Harrikins," Fred started, smirking at Harry's scowl at the annoying nickname. "Ron's been hearing your story for the last decade." Harry groaned.

"But, our little sister seems to think that you're going to be the perfect husband." George finished.

Harry collapsed onto his back, banging his head against the floor. "Please, tell me she's not some 'Boy-Who-Lived' groupie!"

"Okay."

"We won't tell you."

Harry groaned again, before shooting up, as something George said pierced his consciousness. "Wait a minute... Did you say 'husband'?" Both twins nodded in unison. Harry ignored Hermione's discrete snickering. "This girl has never met me, never seen me, never said a word to me... and she thinks I'm the perfect husband?"

Hermione covered her mouth, before giggling out, "She sounds like that girl from Fatal Attraction."

"Oh, crap, a bunny boiler." Harry said, before flopping back down. Not just a bloody bunny boiler, but a girl who uses love potions on unsuspecting Gryffindors. I am so screwed. He looked over at Hermione. "I want to go home..."

Yet Another Author's Note: Somebody asked me, in one of my reviews, "Why does Ron have to be such a git?" Well, the answer is very simple. Ron IS a git. I mean, he has NO redeeming features, and JK expects us to believe that he lands the smartest witch of her generation? I mean, come on! Besides, and this is more important: I don't like Ron. I have several stories in the works, and Ron's hated and reviled in every single one. If someone can give me a valid reason to include him, I will happily do so... maybe.

– CHAPTER TEN –

An Interlude

Approximately eight weeks into the school year, Dumbledore called a staff meeting. It was routine at the beginning of each term, to ensure that there were no problems with students.

“So, are there any problems we need to go over?” He asked, his grandfatherly persona in place, eyes twinkling furiously.

“Nothing springs to mind, Albus.” Minerva said, biting on her lip for a moment, before deciding to go for broke. “Well... there is one student who I feel I should mention.”

“Harry Potter.” Several other teachers spoke as one.

Dumbledore suppressed a groan. He’d been expecting something like this. After finding out he was famous, he would inevitably become an arrogant idiot. “What about Mr. Potter?” He asked warily.

“Well...” McGonagall began.

“Transfiguration is the most complex of all magical arts.” McGonagall said firmly, before changing her desk into a pig, then changing it back. “As such, if anybody feels a need to ‘play about’ in my lessons, they can leave now. I can assure you, if I catch you not taking this seriously, I will evict you from this class immediately, never to return.”

Hermione and Harry shared a glance, before turning their attention back to the stern professor.

For the next hour, she lectured on the basic principles of Transfiguration, going into enough detail to make Harry go cross-eyed. A swift whack on the back of his head from Hermione straightened him out, while he looked down at his notes.

Thank god for auto-quills! He thought, as he saw every word she’d said neatly written in front of him, just waiting to be read. Ha! I think not.

At that point, McGonagall began handing out matchsticks, telling the students to begin transfiguring them into needles.

Harry glanced around the room, taking in the other students. For some reason, this class included all four houses, giving Harry a prime view of the Ferret, the Weasel, and what appeared to be Weasel's new sidekicks, Neville Longbottom and Seamus Finnegan.

Smirking to himself, Harry, using wandless magic, ignited Ron's match, causing him to drop it and squeal like a four-year old girl.

God, that never gets old. He thought to himself, glancing at Hermione, who was watching him with a faintly disapproving frown.

"Was that really necessary?" She hissed at him.

Harry thought for a moment. "Was it necessary? No." He said. "But, you forgot the follow-up question: Was it funny?"

Hermione suppressed her smirk, before turning back to her match. Harry decided to mess with the Ferret, igniting his match, before getting on with changing his own.

With a tiny flick of his wand, the match changed into a perfect needle. McGonagall was busy scolding both Weasley and Malfoy, handing out new matches.

Hermione looked over, a frustrated frown on her face at seeing Harry complete the assignment so easily, while she'd only managed to make her match slightly pointy.

Harry caught her look, and smiled at her. "Hermione, what are you doing?" He whispered.

"How'd you do that?" She hissed.

"I'll show you." He took the match out of her hand, waving his wand to 'reset' it back to a plain match.

Over the next ten minutes, Harry explained the secret of Transfiguration to Hermione, who followed with a rapt attention that scared the piss out of him. Unknown to Harry, McGonagall was loitering on the floor in her Animagus form, listening to every word he said.

He finished the explanation, handing the match back to Hermione, while McGonagall scurried away. With a flick of her wand, Hermione's match had changed into a perfect needle.

Harry looked up to see McGonagall stood directly in front of his desk. "That will be five points to Ravenclaw, Miss Granger, for an perfect job at transfiguring your needle." She looked at Harry. "And that will be ten points to Ravenclaw for you, Mr. Potter, for being the first to complete the assignment, and an additional five points for your detailed explanation to Miss Granger."

Harry blinked... then blinked again. An elbow to his ribs, courtesy of the lovely Miss Granger, brought Harry's attention back to the here and now. "Thank you, Professor."

Harry picked up his needle, and started playing, waving his wand. The needle began to grow, both in length and thickness. When it got to be about two metres long, Harry stopped.

"Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked, wondering what the hell she'd do with a two metre long sewing needle.

"I thought it'd be good for sports day." Harry said. "Javelin's supposed to be really good for the arm."

"Right." McGonagall said, taking the freaky needle from him, and placing it on her desk.

Dumbledore looked stunned for a moment. "So... he turned a match into a Javelin?" He asked. Even as a Transfiguration Master, he'd be hard pressed to match that. There was only so much you could do with a small match.

“That’s not all.” McGonagall added. “During every lesson, he completes his work with an ease I’d be barely able to do. At this rate, he’ll have completed his NEWTs by the end of his first year.”

“I-I had s-something s-s-similar.” Quirrell said, stuttering his way through the sentence. “T-throughout my l-lesson, he knew e-e-everything I tried to t-t-teach him. I agree with M-Minerva. He’ll be a NEWT student within weeks at t-this rate.”

Dumbledore looked at Sprout, who shrugged. “He handles plants like I do, Albus.” She said simply.

“Proof enough of near-Mastery level.” He said, tipping his hat to Sprout. He looked at his snarky Potions Master. “Severus?”

Snape sneered, before toning down his annoyance. “He’s an... adequate brewer.” He said.

McGonagall smiled at Flitwick. “Severus, for you, that’s positively gushing! He must be good.”

“Filius?” Dumbledore asked, trying to keep the meeting on track.

“As good as his mother was during her OWL year.” Flitwick said. “He seems to have a natural connection with magic. I do believe that boy could make his Charms do anything he wants.”

Hooch spoke up. “During his first flying lesson, he got on a broom, an old Cleansweep Three, in dying need of replacing, and made it perform like a brand new Nimbus, Albus.” She smiled at the memory. “Not only that, he took another student up with him, since she was afraid to go on her own. Since then, she’s come to me several times for practice.”

“We saw them.” McGonagall and Flitwick said together. “Coming back from the lake.” McGonagall concluded.

“They looked so romantic.” Flitwick said dreamily.

Snape snorted, then started coughing. "Please, not more Potter love disasters..." He muttered to himself.

"So, Mr. Potter's adjusting well to life in school." Dumbledore said. General murmurs of agreement were made by the staff members present. "He's not displaying any signs of... Severus, do not answer this... he's not demonstrating any arrogance, or belief that he should be treated differently than other students?"

The group shook their heads, except for Hooch. "Other than what I told you about, Albus. I wouldn't normally allow two first years together on a broom, but he appears to have his father's skill... and you know how good he was."

Flitwick perked up. "As good as his father?" His eyes turned glassy at the prospect of a Potter on his House Quidditch team.

"Better, I'd say." Hooch said, smiling at the Charms Professor's enthusiasm.

"Albus, could we-"

"Yes." Dumbledore interrupted. "I wouldn't want to deprive you of potential Quidditch talent, Filius."

In the Gryffindor dormitories, three young men plotted mischief.

"Why are we doing this again?" Neville asked. "It seems... dishonest."

Ron frowned. "Neville, doesn't it seem odd that the 'Boy-Who-Lived', the saviour of the Wizarding world, is in the house for bookworms? Shouldn't he be here, in Gryffindor? Home of the Brave?"

"He should." The third member of the trio said, his accent slurring his words slightly. "Harry shouldn't be a Ravenclaw. He'll turn out to be just another nerd. We should get him to move in with us."

Neville just shrugged. "Who cares? I mean, he took care of You-Know-Who. What does it matter what house he's in?"

“Well, I don’t like him.” Seamus said.

“Maybe so,” Ron said, “but, you know about the Potters. They were a very wealthy family, and if we make ourselves friends with Harry, we could share that wealth. Plus, there’s the fame of being his friends. He’ll be in the spotlight a lot while he’s here at Hogwarts, and if we’re his mates, we can be there, too.”

This appealed to Neville’s shy nature. “In the spotlight? As his friends?”

“How hard can it be, really?” Ron asked. “I mean, all he does is hang out with that ugly little bushy-haired bookworm. We’re way better friends for him.”

Seamus and Neville looked at each other and shrugged. “I’m in.” Seamus said.

“Me, too.” Neville added.

“Shit.” Ron looked at his watch. “Come on... we’ll be late for Charms.”

– CHAPTER ELEVEN –

The Troll

The Charms lesson proceeded exactly as Harry remembered. He floated his feather up to the roof, gently aiming his wand to send it around the ceiling.

Hermione quickly followed, before engaging in a brief but silly feather fight in the air.

However, Ron Weasley, prick extraordinaire, was sitting next to Hermione, waving his wand like he was trying to give everyone in the class a cold.

She took pity on him, and told him how to say the incantation. When the lesson ended, Harry waited for Hermione to pack up her books, return her feather, and head out of the classroom. Into the incident Harry was really hoping to avoid.

“Honestly, that girl!” Ron moaned. “She’s a bloody nightmare! ‘It’s Lev-i-osar’! No wonder she hasn’t got any friends!”

Harry turned to look behind him, gaping at Ron incredulously. He turned back to Hermione, only to see the back of her head, as she rushed away from him. “Hermione!” He shouted, but was ignored. Harry dropped his bag, and turned to face Weasley.

“What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?” He demanded. “She does have friends! I’m proud to be her friend!”

Ron sneered, looking eerily like Malfoy. “Are you? How... lucky for you! She’s just a stupid Mudblood! She shouldn’t even be in this school! You really should get some better friends.”

Harry saw red, clenching his fist. “She deserves to be here, Weasley. More than you do.” He cocked his head. “And by better friends, do you mean yourself?”

Ron nodded. "You've not got anything in common with her. I mean, you're the youngest Quidditch player in a century. You should hang out with the lads, learn Quidditch."

Ron didn't even notice Harry's fist closing on his face, before the redhead was knocked arse over teakettle on the floor.

"Never," Harry's eyes were glowing green, "talk about Hermione Granger again. She's a far better person than you will ever be."

The rest of the first years took a step back. Harry's eyes were actually lit up, like somebody had placed a candle in them, and it was scary. Harry looked around at them, his tone icy cold, and an aura of power flickering around him. "Does anybody else have anything to say about my friend?"

As one, the first years shook their heads, and scurried off to... wherever they were going.

Harry turned back, letting the glow in his eyes fade. Is that all it takes? Bloody special effects? Useless prats. Now... Hermione. Harry rushed off to the second-floor toilets, where he knew Hermione was hiding. Ignoring etiquette, he opened the door, and walked in, ignoring the squawk from a second-year Hufflepuff, who rushed out of the door.

"Hermione?" He heard a sobbing coming from one of the stalls, and made his way over. "Hermione?" Harry heard her snuffle, as he lowered himself to his knees in front of the door.

"Harry?" She asked tentatively. "What are you doing in here?"

He rolled his eyes. "I came to see if you're okay." He said quietly. "I was worried about you."

She sniffed again. "What if he's right, Harry?" She whispered.

“He said you didn’t have any friends, Hermione.” Harry whispered back. “And we both know that’s wrong. Isn’t it?” She didn’t say anything, just blew her nose. “Hermione?”

“What if he’s right?” She whispered again.

Harry felt his heart drop into his shoes. “I thought we were friends, Hermione.” He whispered through the door.

Hermione looked up. “Why, Harry? Why would you want to be my friend? Like he said, I’m just a know-it-all nightmare!”

Harry didn’t have to think about his response. “If you are, you’re my know-it-all nightmare. And, I don’t think you are a nightmare, or a know-it-all.” He sighed. “You’re my Hermione, a young lady who loves her studying.”

She sniffed again, crying for another reason. “Thank you, Harry.”

“Are you gonna come out, now?” He asked softly.

Hermione shook her head, unaware that Harry couldn’t see her. “Uh... I need a few minutes, Harry. I’m... I just need to freshen up a bit.”

Harry’s next words filled her heart, making her blood sing through her veins. “You couldn’t be anything less than beautiful, Hermione.” He whispered. “I’ll wait here for you.”

“No, Harry.” She replied, blowing her nose again. “You go on down to the feast. I’ll meet you down there.”

“Are you sure?” Harry asked. “I really don’t mind waiting for you.”

“I’m sure. Save me a space?” Hermione asked, feeling better by the moment.

“Don’t I always?” He asked, giving off his heart-stopping grin.

“I’ll be right down, Harry.” Hermione replied. I’ll probably scare him to death if I come out looking like this.

Harry nodded, and stood up, wincing as the feeling came back into his legs. "Catch you on the flip side."

The feast was in full swing, hundreds of students laughing, eating and drinking. Overhead, floating candles mixed with pumpkin jack-o-lanterns, giving the whole hall a medieval feel.

This is nice. Harry thought to himself. I've never really enjoyed Halloween. It's a pity Quirrell's letting that troll in, even as we speak.

Harry had loaded up his plate, and another one beside him, but hadn't actually started eating. He had kept the seat to the right of him free, and left the second plate there.

On his left, Terry Boot stopped eating, wondering why Harry hadn't started yet. "Harry?"

Harry looked to his left. "Yeah, Terry?"

"What are you waiting for?" He gestured at the untouched plate.

"Hermione." Harry replied, taking a sip of his pumpkin juice.

"Ah." He had seen the confrontation after Charms class, and had been scared witless when he saw Harry's resulting display of power. "Will she be long?"

Harry shook his head tersely. "She's just... freshening up."

"Ah." Terry wisely went back to his food.

Harry checked his watch. It was time. As if on cue, Professor Quirrell rushed into the Great Hall, squealing loudly. "Troll!" He bellowed. "Troll in the Dungeons! Just thought you ought to know..." At that, he passed out, falling forwards.

When you faint, you fall backwards, silly bugger. Harry thought to himself. Around him, students started mewling, making scared noises.

And... cue Dumbledore!

“Silence!” Dumbledore’s calm voice cut through the children’s wailing like a foghorn. “Prefects, lead your houses back to their dormitories. Teachers, with me... to the Dungeons.”

The Ravenclaw prefects stood, but were too late to see Harry running from the Great Hall like a man possessed.

He arrived at the girls’ bathroom in record time, having climbed two flights of stairs and run a third of a mile in less than a minute. He wasn’t even breathing hard.

He burst into the bathroom, seeing Hermione stood in front of the sinks, finishing washing her face. She saw Harry in the mirror, and spun round. “Harry? What’s wrong?”

At that moment, a vile smell came wafting through the open door. Harry looked over his shoulder. Shit! It’s blocking the bloody corridor! I was really hoping I wouldn’t have to fight it, this time.

“Troll.” Harry said, drawing his wand. Hermione looked over his shoulder, and ‘eeped’, before ducking down behind Harry.

“What are we going to do?” She asked, moving back to one of the stalls.

Harry turned to her, wearing his heart-melting grin. “Stay down. I’ll take care of it.” Hermione nodded, and stood next to the farthest stall.

Harry put his wand away, and waved his hand in front of his nose, trying to remove the vile stench of the incoming troll.

It lumbered it’s way in, roaring a challenge at the little creature stood in front of it. Being a creature of instinct, it raised the club, aiming to squash the little bug.

Harry waited until the last possible moment, before calling all his power into his body. For a few moments, Harry’s skin became harder than diamond, and his muscles contained enough power to move the earth out of orbit.

Hermione watched as Harry stood perfectly still. Something inside her told her not to interfere, and to just let Harry take care of her. She knew he wouldn't let her down.

Harry saw the club coming down, and raised his hand, catching the club in mid-swing. The troll looked on stupidly as it's club was stuck. A moment later, it had vanished from it's hand.

Harry threw the club in the air, spinning it so he could grab the handle. As soon as it hit his palm, he grasped it, and swung it at the troll's knees, before swinging it, in a perfect golf arc, into the troll's groin. As he predicted, the troll roared, dropping to it's damaged knees. Harry dropped the club, and closed his eyes, putting all of his power into his legs.

Opening his eyes, he saw the troll roughly level with his head, and lashed out, hitting the creature in the face with a perfect Tornado kick. The troll roared again, this time in agony instead of anger, and smashed into the wall.

Head reeling, the troll straightened up, it's gaze now cross-eyed. Harry took pity, and closed his eyes again, transferring his power from his feet to his fists. He placed his fists together, letting them glow red, before launching a perfect Phoenix punch at the creature, rendering it unconscious.

Harry shook his hand, trying to get the feeling back, and turned to Hermione. She was looking at him in awe, before he turned on his 'aw, shucks' grin. He made his way over to her.

"Are you okay?" He asked, looking her up and down.

"I'm fine..." She replied absently. "Harry... you just knocked out a mountain troll... with your hands."

Harry nodded, distracted by the pain in his right hand. "I know... it hurts, too." He held out his hand. "Shall we go?"

Hermione took his hand without thinking, as the two started to make their way out of the room. "Where are we going? And why aren't we staying here?"

Harry grinned. "One, it stinks in here. Bloody trolls... And we're going to the Common Room. Professor Dumbledore said we all had to go to our Common Rooms while the teachers dealt with the troll."

"But... you dealt with it." Hermione replied, looking confused.

"Well, that wasn't exactly my plan." Harry said, looking around absently. "I figured you were still in the toilets, so I came to get you."

Hermione stopped, pulling on his hand to keep him with her. "You ran through the school... risking meeting a troll... for me?"

Harry rolled his eyes at her. "Of course I did." He answered her, making it sound like the most natural thing in the world. "You're my friend, Hermione. I promised, didn't I, that I wouldn't let you fall?"

She smiled shyly at him, before wrapping him in, what Harry had called in the previous time-line, a Hermi-hug. He hugged her back, holding her tightly. She looked up at him, delicate tears in her eyes. "Yes." She whispered. "You promised."

He leaned down, and kissed the top of her forehead. "Come on. We'd better get moving before the teachers get here."

The two were sitting in the Ravenclaw Common Room, hunched next to each other on a small, pale-blue loveseat.

"Why didn't you want the teachers to know who'd done that, Harry?" She asked after a pregnant pause of fifteen minutes.

Harry ran his fingers through his hair, Why does he have to do that? Hermione thought to herself, and looked back at her. "Because, they'll ask questions like 'how did you do it?' and 'why didn't you go back to your common room?'. Plus, it'll single me out for attention. I don't want that. I hate being the bloody 'Boy-Who-Lived'."

She nodded thoughtfully. "I can understand that, I suppose." She grinned at him. "If it helps, I'll always treat you as 'just Harry'."

He looked at her, and grinned his 'heart-stopping' grin, causing her to melt inside. Damn him! "Thanks, Hermione." He leaned closer, resting his forehead on hers, and staring deeply into her eyes. "You really don't know what that means to me."

She chuckled nervously, and looked away. Harry pulled his head back, and slumped backwards into the small couch, Hermione following right behind him.

"So... was the feast any good?" Hermione asked, taking his hand in her own. The action was instinctive and automatic. While she leaned back, she let her eyelids drift down.

Harry squeezed her hand gently, and looked back at her. "Dunno. Didn't eat anything. I was waiting for you."

Her eyes shot open, staring at him incredulously. "What? Why?"

Harry looked at her, smiling warmly at her. "I said I'd wait for you. I did."

"Oh, Harry." Hermione leaned in closer, and rested her head on his shoulder. "You shouldn't have, you know."

"I keep my promises, Hermione." Harry said seriously. "I said I'd wait for you, and I did."

She squeezed his hand, and was about to reply, when the loudspeaker sounded.

"The danger has now passed. Would all students please make their way to the Great Hall." Professor McGonagall's voice sounded throughout the castle.

"Hey, maybe we can get some dinner." Harry said, pulling Hermione to her feet. She laughed softly, following him.

Inside the Great Hall, the plates had been cleaned, and fresh food was waiting for them. Harry made his way to his usual spot on the Ravenclaw table, pulling Hermione down with him.

He quickly loaded up a plate, starving after the fight. He was about to start attacking his meal, when the Headmaster stood up.

Oh, bugging bloody bollocks! He thought savagely. That plate of chicken legs is just calling to me.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "As Professor Quirrell announced earlier this evening, a troll did indeed make it's way into the castle. However... we found the troll, unconscious, in the second floor girls' bathroom."

Harry nodded absently, still staring at the chicken legs. They were teasing him now, dripping juices mockingly.

"We," Dumbledore gestured to the teaching staff, "would like to know if anyone has anything they'd like to share with us."

At the Gryffindor table, Ron looked at Neville and Seamus, who both nodded, and stood up.

Hermione poked Harry's ribs, causing him to look sharply at her. "What?" He whispered. He pointed at the teasing chicken legs. "Can't you see, Hermione? They're mocking me! Look at them!" He hissed at her.

She rolled her eyes, and gestured up at Dumbledore. "Harry," She hissed back. "Dumbledore wants to know who knocked the troll out."

Harry rolled his eyes, while waving her comments away with a dismissive wave. "The chicken legs, Hermione! They're teasing me." "It was us, sir." Ron said proudly. "We went there, 'cause we heard one of the girls was stuck in the bathroom."

Snape snorted into his coffee, inwardly laughing at the thought of three first-years managing to vanquish a mountain troll.

Dumbledore looked down his nose at the three. "You three managed to knock out a mountain troll?" He asked, his Legilimency detecting the lie immediately.

"Yes, sir." Neville bragged proudly.
Hermione hissed at the three, and then turned back to Harry. "Harry, they're stealing credit for what you did!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Let them. If it means I can eat dinner, they're welcome to it."

"No." Hermione said, standing up. She looked at Dumbledore. "Sir, they're lying. It wasn't them. It was Harry."

Hearing his name, he slumped lower in his seat, trying to avoid staring at the chicken. It was still teasing him, damn it! He idly wondered if he could apparate out of the Great Hall. Maybe the Three Broomsticks was still serving dinner...

The three Gryffindor students looked over at Hermione, sneering as one. "Really?" Ron asked arrogantly. "Why hasn't he come forward, then?"

Harry, hearing the stupid Weasel speaking, stood up, his eyes once again glowing with power. "Because, Ronald, some of us aren't glory hounds. I did what was necessary."

Dumbledore frowned at the by-play between the two young men. They were supposed to be best friends. It was part of 'the Plan', that he had thought up ten long years ago. By having Harry aligned with a confirmed light family, it would allow them to ensure Harry remained on the true path, instead of being lured to the Dark.

He cleared his throat. "Mr. Potter, would you please share with us what happened?"

Harry grimaced, as he got up, glared briefly at Hermione for putting him in this bloody mess in the first place, and stomped up to the teachers' table.

Instead of telling them, he raised his wand to his temple, and closed his eyes.

“Exertus Memoria!” From his temple, a large projection rose, showing the sequence of events, from Professor Quirrell running into the Great Hall, to Harry making a dash through the corridors that no other student could match.

When it came to Harry catching the club, everyone gasped in shock. This was a feat that no-one could match, not even the most powerful wizard in the world, Professor Dumbledore.

When Harry knocked the troll out, using a strange kick and a small punch, everyone was stunned. They watched as Harry made his way over to Hermione, before the memory faded.

Harry, without saying another word, made his way back to his place, before Dumbledore’s voice stopped him.

“Is there...” He couldn’t believe what he had seen. “Is there anything else, Mr. Potter?”

Harry turned back to Dumbledore, and shook his head, before something popped into his mind. “Just this, sir. If anybody, and I mean anybody, touches the chicken legs in front of my plate, I will be very unhappy.”

He stomped back to his plate, and lifted the entire platter of chicken legs to in front of him. Around him, the students stared in shock, as he started to eat. A hand crept forward from his right, snagging a chicken leg. He looked up, and saw Hermione staring back at him innocently, a chicken leg held delicately in her hand.

He smiled at her. “Okay... I’ll let you.” She grinned at him, and took a dainty bite.

At the Head Table, McGonagall shook her head, bringing her thoughts back to the moment. She stood, and cleared her throat. “Mr. Potter.”

He rolled his eyes, before standing up, still munching on his chicken leg. "Yes, Professor?"

"That will be one hundred points to Ravenclaw for your outstanding courage and dedication to a friend."

Harry blinked, a bit shocked. Hang on a minute... she only gave me five points the first time round... Huh. "Thank you, Professor."

McGonagall nodded, then turned to the three still-standing boys from her own house. "Mr. Finnegan, Mr. Longbottom and Mr. Weasley. That will be fifty points from Gryffindor for your lying scheme. And one month's detention."

The three boys blanched at being rebuked so harshly in public. Of course, Ron had to open his mouth. "Fifty points, Professor!"

McGonagall's lips thinned to an almost imperceptible white line. "Fifty points each, Mr. Weasley."

With that, the three got murderous glares from the rest of Gryffindor house, the most murderous from Percy, the prefect.

Ooh, boy. There'll be a howler in the morning for you, Ronnie-boy. He thought with malicious glee, sitting down and starting on another chicken leg.

The feast was winding down, as most people had eaten their fill, and were chatting. Except for Harry Potter, who was still going strong. Unlike the rest of the places, there were no platters of food around Harry. He was now starting to look up and down the table, to see what was left.

"Terry!" Harry called out. "Pass us them sausages, will ya?" He looked further down. "Cho, can you send them spuds down here?" He looked down the other side. "Hermione, will you grab them veggies and that jug of gravy? Ooh, Marietta! Can you pass down that Roast Beef?"

Hermione was watching with a morbid curiosity as Harry ate enough for three people. "Harry, how can you still be eating?"

He loaded up his plate again, and started to maul the poor food. "You try knocking out a mountain troll. I had to really speed up my metabolism to get the energy I needed."

Hermione thought it over. "So... you basically burned a large amount of energy punching that troll."

Harry nodded, not daring answering aloud. He remembered some of the verbal beatings he got in the original time-line when he did that. He swallowed noisily. "Yep. And you saw how my hands were glowing when I punched it? My hand was basically loaded with a massive stunning charm. That, combined with knocking out its teeth, put it down."

Hermione nodded again, her mouth curled into a silent 'Oh'. She reached for another pumpkin pasty, idly chewing. "Harry?"

He swallowed another mouthful of food before looking back at her. "Yes, Hermione?"

She smiled shyly at him. "I didn't thank you."

He smiled at her, causing her pulse to race. "And you'll never have to." He reached out, and squeezed her hand, before grabbing his fork, and demolishing another sausage.

Hermione sat back slightly, and thought about her brief friendship with Harry Potter. In less than two months, he'd wormed his way through her tough mental defence structures, those designed to make sure she didn't get hurt by people, and now lurked there. Damn him. She thought. I was prepared to not have any friends here. I wasn't prepared for a boy to become one of the most important people in my life. Two months! Two bloody months! I took longer than that to like the damn dog! She sighed. Why does he have to be so... so bloody perfect. Damn him!

Harry looked over at Hermione, who was lost in thought. He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a bronze Knut. He placed it on the table in front of her, pulling her from her musing.

“What’s this for?” She asked, picking up the coin.

From behind them, Harry could hear the vile tones of the Malfoy brat. “Maybe he thinks that’s what you’re worth, Mudblood!” He hissed.

Harry gave him a gesture with his hand which cast aspersions on Malfoy’s self-pleasuring capabilities, before turning to Hermione. “Your thoughts, my dear Hermione.”

She looked down, getting the saying. “Oh... Knut for my thoughts. I get it.”

He grinned, pulling another Knut from his pocket. “Are you going to make me pay more?”

Hermione rolled her eyes, stuck out her tongue, and playfully threw the coin at him. “No. I was just thinking.”

Harry winced. “Ooh... that’s not good. Should I duck and cover?”

“Prat.”

“Yes.”

“It’s just... you’re a great friend, Harry.” She said softly. Harry blushed, and threw her the ‘aw, shucks’ smiled. She softened when she saw him smiling at her. “I mean it.” She leaned in closer. “I mean... I’ve never had friends, before... and... and in less than two months, you’re the best friend I could ask for.”

Harry smiled warmly, reaching over and taking her hand. “Thank you, Hermione. It’s the same with me. Do me a favour?” He asked.

She nodded. “Probably.”

“Never change. Always be this Hermione.”

She cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

"Always be like this. Don't... don't turn into one of those vapid useless girls." He gestured down the table, where several students were comparing hair and makeup tips. "Always be like you are now."

She smiled shyly. "Well... I can't promise that, Harry." She saw his pout. "But, I'll do my best."

He grinned at her. "That's my girl." His smile froze in place. Did I just say that out loud?

Did he just say I was his girl? Hermione cocked her head. Do I want to be his girl? She looked at his frozen smile. Oh, bugger it, I do! Another thought popped into her mind. That's now... What happens when he grows up? Sod it, I'll worry then. "Okay, Harry."

He said nothing, just smiled at her.

– CHAPTER TWELVE –

Leading Up to the Holidays

November passed in a rush of mind-numbingly dull classes. With the exceptions of a few fights with Slytherin, Bloody Malfoy! and a couple of three-on-one fights with Gryffindor, Weasley, Longbottom and Finnegan... useless gits! Everything was running quite well. It was mid-December, and Harry was bored. He knew that he wouldn't stay in the castle this time, and was looking forward to getting back to his flat for a little relaxation.

He approached Hermione in the Common Room, not sure whether his plan was a good idea or not. "Hermione?" He asked tentatively.

She looked up from her Charms book, unconsciously smiling, and sitting up a little. "Yes, Harry?"

He looked down at his hands, nervous. "I was just wondering... do you know what you're doing for Christmas?"

Hermione looked down at the book, mentally reviewing her most recent letters to her parents. "It's just me, Mum and Dad, having Christmas Dinner. Why?"

He looked up, a slight blush on his cheeks. "Well... do you think you and your parents would like to spend the Christmas holiday in the Wizarding world?"

Hermione looked at him, a blush marking her cheeks as she realised what he was actually asking. "You mean... we come and stay with you?"

Harry nodded shyly. "Yes."

"I thought you lived with your relatives... and that they hated magic." Hermione replied.

"I don't live with them, anymore. As soon as I turned eleven, I got emancipated. I own a flat in Diagon Alley. It's got three bedrooms..."

He looked down at his hands again. "I thought it might be nice to spend Christmas with my friend."

Hermione's heart went out to him, and she resolved to immediately ask her parents. "Harry?"

He looked up at her. "Hmm?"

"Do you mind if I borrow Hedwig?"

Dan and Emma Granger prided themselves on being perfectly rational people. Coming from a perfectly normal middle-class background, and reasonably well off, after all, running a private dentistry earned the pair quite a bit of money, made the two quite aware of the world.

Until, of course, it was announced that their daughter was a witch. When that happened, the two went through the usual stages; disbelief, fear, avoidance, and acceptance. After a brief visit from one of the tutors of the magical school, they decided they would leave the decision up to their daughter to make.

When she decided to go, the two, being good parents, threw their full support behind her, as she set off to a completely new world, to learn and to grow.

The letters they had received had cheered them up immensely. Their daughter, always alone because she scared the other children with her frightening intelligence, had immediately made friends with a boy on the train, who had stuck with her through thick and thin.

When the letter came from Hermione's Head of House about the Halloween incident, their first instinct was to pull her out of the school, due to the danger. Several hurried letters from Hermione, and one from her friend, had put their minds at ease, as it was explained that a gargantuan creature rampaging through the school was an exception, not the norm.

The most recent letter from their daughter was... startling, to say the least. Her friend had invited all three of them to his house over Christmas.

"Dan, what do you think?" Emma asked.

Dan didn't reply straight away, just leaned back in his recliner and thought. A minute later, he answered. "Let's pro and con it, shall we?" Emma nodded. "Cons first. We'll be leaving the house empty for almost three weeks." He thought for a moment. "That's all I got."

Emma chuckled. "Pros, then. We'll get to meet this boy that's got our Hermione all in a tether. We don't have to cook." She grinned cheekily. "No cleaning up the carnage, either."

Dan chuckled. "Although, that's not really a factor. We'll get to see how wizards celebrate Christmas. And... we'll see Hermione happy."

The two nodded to each other. It was decided. They would be spending Christmas in the Wizarding world. Hermione rushed through the corridors, intent on getting to the Great Hall, and finding Harry. As expected, she saw him engrossed in a book, Probably Quidditch, at the Ravenclaw table, and haphazardly working his way through an immense pile of bacon sandwiches.

She plopped onto the bench next to him, waving the note excitedly. "Harry, they said yes!"

Harry looked up from his book, and grinned. "Excellent! Did they say what they'd be doing?"

She nodded, and held the note out to him. "Basically, when the Express pulls in, they'll pick us both up, and take us to Diagon Alley." She cocked her head. "Is there a place to park there?"

Harry shook his head. "Parking in central London? Not a chance, too expensive. We'll just keep the car at my place."

"Oh." Hermione looked perplexed. "How?"

Harry just chuckled. "I'll show you when we get there." He passed the note back. "God, I'm looking forward to this. I've never had a proper Christmas before."

"Never?"

Shit. Didn't mean to say that. "Uh... well... for the Dursleys, I ended up making their dinner, then being thrown into my... room, while they ate it. Then, I got dragged into the kitchen to do the clean-up."

Hermione's eyes instantly filled with tears. "Oh, Harry." She pulled him into a 'Hermi-hug'. "Well... you don't live with them, anymore, so it's okay."

Harry squeezed her back. "I know. But, I'm not looking forward to Professor Dumbledore's speech."

"Eh? What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

"Well, Professor Dumbledore doesn't know that I've moved out of the Dursleys." Harry said, attacking yet another bacon sandwich. Hermione was sure she could hear the faint sounds of pigs squealing in the distance.

"What does it have to do with him?" She asked, sneakily pinching one of his sandwiches.

"It was him that placed me at the Dursleys in the first place. Something to do with my Mum's blood. I don't know. But, he'll try and make me go back there."

She looked at him, scowling. "Well... well... you're not, are you?"

Harry sniggered. "Hell, no! I'm gonna have my first enjoyable Christmas." He wrapped his free arm around her shoulder. "With my first friend."

She grinned shyly, and took another bite of her purloined sandwich. The day before school let out for the holidays, Harry received a note from Professor Dumbledore, asking him to see him in his office.

Harry showed the note to Hermione, who rolled her eyes. "Do you want me to come with you, Harry?"

He shook his head. "I should be okay, Hermione. He'll try and stop me, but it's okay. I promise." He took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, then let it fall back into her lap. He took a few deep, fortifying breaths, then left the common room.

The walk to the Headmaster's office was like walking the Green Mile. Damn Stephen King for writing such a good book. As he approached the gargoyle that protected the entryway, he smiled at it.

"Would you please open?" The gargoyle, obeying the rule of Harry being the heir of Hogwarts, opened immediately for him. Harry stood on the revolving staircase, letting it carry him up.

When he got to the top, he knocked on the door. "Come in." The Headmaster's voice called. Harry took a last deep breath, and entered the room.

Dumbledore looked up, a little startled that the gargoyle guarding his stairs hadn't warned him that someone was coming. He hadn't even given the boy the password.

"Ah, Harry." He said, quickly bringing himself back under control. "I'm glad you could stop by." He peered down his nose. "I'm curious, my boy, as to how you got past the gargoyle."

Harry shrugged. "I asked it to let me in, Headmaster."

"Ah." How would it do that? It's only supposed to open for me. Curious... "Anyway, Harry. I asked you here, because I saw your name on the list of students who were going home for Christmas."

"Yes, sir?" Harry replied, sounding politely confused.

"I'm glad to see that you're getting along with the Dursleys, Harry."

“The Dursleys, Headmaster?” Harry was again sounding politely confused. “What do they have to do with my going home for Christmas?”

Now Dumbledore was confused. “Well... you live with the Dursleys, Harry.”

Harry shook his head. “No, sir. I live in my flat on Diagon Alley. Have since my birthday.”

“What?” Dumbledore sounded aghast. “Why didn’t you notify me?”

Cocking his head, Harry stared at the Headmaster, tightening his Occlumency barriers. “With respect, sir, I was planning on notifying you at the end of the year, so that my second year letter would be sent to the right place.”

“But, Harry, you must return to the Dursleys. It’s not safe for you to live anywhere else.” Dumbledore replied, in his usual grandfatherly tone.

Harry stared at Dumbledore, waiting for the other man to crack first. Dumbledore began to fidget. “Yes, Harry?”

“I’m waiting for you to explain that statement, Headmaster.” Harry replied with infinite patience.

“Harry, you were placed with the Dursleys ten years ago for your own protection. There are special wards available to you, but only if you live there.”

“Protection from what, Headmaster?” Harry asked, wondering just how far Dumbledore would go.

Dumbledore took off his glasses, and rubbed the top of his nose. “That’s a difficult question to answer, Harry. I ask that you trust me, and return to your Aunt’s house for Christmas, and also for the summer.”

Harry shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. Without a definitive reason, I choose to return to my own home."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, his hands folded on the desk. "I'm sorry, then, Harry, but I have no choice but to confine you to the school during the holiday period."

Harry stiffened, but managed to keep his fiery temper under control. "You do not have the authority to do that, Headmaster." He swallowed several insults. "As my Headmaster, you have limited authority to advise me, but you cannot specify where I live, nor can you restrict me to the school during holidays."

Dumbledore searched through the papers on his desk, picking one up. "Actually, Harry, I can." He passed the parchment over. "This gives me a Power-of-Attorney over you, until you come of age. As such, I have the authority to specify where you go." He leaned back in his chair. "So, will you be going to the Dursleys, or remaining at Hogwarts?"

Harry read the parchment through, noting the date on the bottom, and passed it back with an expressionless face. "Neither, Headmaster. I will be returning to my flat on Diagon Alley." He gestured to the parchment, "This Power of Attorney was made on July 1st. As such, when I went to Gringotts on July 31st, I was emancipated, as I am the last of the Potters." He held up his hand, showing off the Head of Family ring.

Dumbledore reared back in shock. "How did you know about that?" He demanded, all traces of the grandfatherly persona gone.

Harry kept his expression neutral. "That's not relevant to our discussion, Headmaster. But, as you can see, your document is now worthless." He stood up. "Good afternoon, Headmaster."

Dumbledore's wand was in his hand in a flash. "No, Harry." He stood. "I've told you about your options. You can either remain at Hogwarts, where the wards of the castle will protect you, or you can return to the Dursleys, where the blood wards will protect you." He shook his head sadly. "I will have to go before the Wizengamot in order to overturn

your emancipation.” He looked at Harry with a sad expression. “Do you know how much extra work you’ve created for me, Harry?”

Harry chuckled mirthlessly. “Extra work I’ve created for you, Headmaster? I have done no such thing. I have claimed my birthright, according to the law.” Without a word, he passed through the door, and left the office.

Dumbledore flopped back into his chair, tucking his wand into his sleeve. This is not good. He needs to go to the Dursleys for his own protection! He pondered, and pulled a clean piece of parchment over, before inking a quill.

The Hogwarts Express pulled out of Hogsmeade at exactly eleven o’clock. There had been a brief kaffuffle, as Filch had tried to stop Harry leaving, on Dumbledore’s orders, but Harry had simply bypassed the caretaker, and boarded the train.

Harry and Hermione were in a compartment, with the door locked and the blinds closed. Both youngsters were sitting on benches, eyes half-closed due to the warmth of the compartment, the gentle rocking motion, and the soothing ‘clack’ sound of the wheels on the track.

“Harry?” Hermione said sleepily.

“Hmm?” Harry replied, just as sleepily.

“Why did Filch try and stop you leaving?”

“Dumbledore doesn’t want me to leave the castle.” Harry replied, opening his eyes fully. “He wouldn’t actually tell me why I have to stay with the Dursleys. Pulled out a Power of Attorney, making him my magical guardian.”

Hermione yawned, and opened her eyes. “You said you were emancipated, though.”

Harry nodded. “I am. He said he’s gonna go to the Wizengamot to get it voided. Even thanked me for making a load of extra work for him. Doddering old fart.”

“Harry... that’s not nice. He’s a professor.” Hermione reproved gently. Hearing about the old man’s ultimatums were making his stock drop rapidly in her opinion.

“Okay, then.” Harry replied. “Doddering old fart of a professor.”

Hermione yawned, and nodded. “Much better, Harry.” She smiled at him. “So, are you gonna explain about the parking now? You never did say.”

Harry stifled yet another yawn, and moved to the end of his bench. “Not yet. Are you tired?”

Hermione nodded. “I can barely keep my eyes open.” She said, yawning again. Harry patted the bench next to him. Hermione abandoned her own seat, and sat next to him, snuggling close. “This is nice.” She whispered.

Harry put his arm around her, pulling her even closer. “It is, isn’t it?” He asked rhetorically. “Sleep, fair Hermione. I’ll wake you when we get there.”

Five hours later, the train started to slow as it approached Kings Cross. Hermione had abandoned her snuggling to lie down on the bench, her head in Harry’s lap, as he gazed down on her adoringly.

“I will always love you.” He whispered, stroking her hair. Hermione moaned, and wriggled slightly, as she made her way back to consciousness.

“You slept well.” Harry said, gazing at her with love in his dreamy green eyes. Hermione felt herself tense as she stared at his eyes, neither blinking.

She sat up, rather embarrassed to realise she fallen asleep in his lap. “Thanks.” She blushed prettily. “I did sleep well.”

“I could tell.” Harry said, smiling. “You have the cutest little snore, you know.”

“Hey!” Hermione slapped at his arm near the shoulder. “I do not snore!”

“I said ‘little snore’, not ‘snore’, you know.” Harry said, rubbing his arms unconsciously. “And, did you notice the key word? ‘Cutest’?”

Hermione blushed again. It seemed half the time she spent with Harry involved her blushing in some way. “Thank you.” She whispered.

In five years time, I’d like nothing more than to fall asleep and wake up to that cute little snore. He thought to himself, his eyes glazing over as he thought about it. He shook his head, bringing his thoughts back to the present.

“We’re just pulling into Kings Cross.” Harry said, standing up and stretching. He let out a gasp of pleasure as his spine cracked twice, causing Hermione to wince.

“That’s gross, you know.”

“Yes.” Harry replied, rolling his head, letting off another three cracks from his neck. “But it feels good.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Grab your trunk, you prat. I wanna find my folks.”

The two left the train, trunks handily shrunk down in pockets. Harry passed through the barrier, quickly followed by Hermione. When he got through, he stopped suddenly. Standing on the other side of the barrier was Vernon Dursley.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Harry asked, discretely reaching for his wand.

Vernon snarled, and turned purple. “I’m here to collect your freak arse, boy!” He snapped. “Get your trunk, and get in the car!”

Harry shook his head. “No. I don’t live with your anymore, remember?”

Vernon rolled his eyes, and changed colour, turning a lovely shade of puce. "I know that, boy. But that blasted Headmaster of yours sent me a letter, telling me that you were coming back for Christmas, and I had to take you in." He raised his fist threateningly. "Now, get your freak stuff, and get in the car!"

"I don't think so." Harry said, pulling his wand out. "Go home, Vernon."

The corpulent man smirked. "You can't use your stick outside of school, boy." He took a step forward, holding his hand out. "Give it to me. I'll give it back to you when you leave in the New Year."

Harry smirked. "Unlike other wizards, Vernon, I can use my wand. If you want to push me, I assure you, you will not like the consequences. Now... get out of my sight!"

Vernon, thoroughly intimidated by an eleven-year old child, turned and ran out of the train station. Hermione turned to Harry, staring at him in shock. "What the hell was he doing here?"

Harry fumed quietly. "Dumbledore." He hissed. "He sent Vernon a letter, telling him to pick me up, and he must have told him that we can't do magic outside of school." The ramifications hit him then. "If Vernon started beating me, I wouldn't even be able to threaten him with magic. He could've killed me!"

Hermione shuddered, and attacked him with a 'Hermi-hug'. "Well... he's gone now." She gave him a gentle squeeze, before letting go. "Now, we need to find my parents."

Ten minutes later, a Vauxhall Vectra pulled out of Kings Cross station, two adults and two wizards tucked inside. The heater was going full blast, in an attempt to get rid of the chill. A Beatles CD was going, and when Harry began to sing along, he shocked all three Grangers.

"You know the Beatles?" Emma asked.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Unlike most people, though, I'm also an Elvis fan."

Hermione looked at him oddly. "Why's that odd?"

A chuckle from the passenger seat caught Hermione's attention. "As a rule, if someone's a Beatles fan, they don't really like Elvis. Like me and your mother. I'm an Elvis fan, while she likes the Beatles."

"Oh." Hermione looked baffled.

"So, where are we headed, Harry?" Dan asked, pulling into the traffic.

"Uh, Charring Cross Road, Mr. Granger." Harry replied politely. "When we get there, we'll need to find a secluded spot to park."

Emma looked over her shoulder. "Parking in London, Harry?"

"No, ma'am." Harry answered. "It's hellishly expensive to park in London, especially for three weeks. So, we're keeping the car at my place."

All three pairs of eyes fell onto him. He raised his hands. "What? Trust me." He smiled his 'Hi, I'm going to date your daughter and you'll love me for it' smile. Emma smiled back, and concentrated on the road, while Dan stared at him, recognising the smile for what it was. He gave a final glare, then turned round.

Hermione winked at him, before taking his hand in hers.

"So, Harry, Hermione said you live in Diagon Alley." Emma said, ignoring the glares her husband was sending the young man.

"Yes, ma'am, I do."

"Is it with your Aunt and Uncle?" Dan asked.

"Uh... no." Harry replied, suddenly nervous with the conversation. "They live in Surrey, sir. They don't particularly like magic, and they're... they're not very nice people."

“Oh.” Dan turned back. “So, who do you live with?”

“It’s just me and Hedwig, sir.” Harry replied. Even Hermione didn’t know this. She thought that he had a room-mate or guardian.

Emma pulled the car over to the side of the road, and turned off the engine. “You live on your own? An eleven-year old boy? Lives alone? In the middle of London?”

Harry nodded. “Yes.”

“And we’re staying at your flat for the next three weeks?” Dan asked, suddenly feeling the sinking feeling in his stomach.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes. Don’t worry about it, though. I promise, you’ll have fun.”

Emma shared the same sinking feeling that her husband had, but decided to go along with Harry... for the moment.

The quartet entered the Leaky Cauldron, and passed through without incident. To Harry’s amusement, and the Granger’s amazement, he had miniaturised their car, and placed a stasis charm on it, to make sure none of the fluids leaked out. There had been a tense moment when Harry nearly dropped it, but quickly straightened it up.

As they passed into the Alley, Harry confidently led the way to an abandoned store, opposite Flourish and Blotts.

“Where’s your flat, Harry?” Hermione asked.

Harry pulled all three Grangers close, and spoke softly. “It’s hidden. You need to listen carefully to what I’m about to say, okay?”

Hermione nodded, and immediately began pondering what charm could be used to hide something.

Harry leaned closer, and whispered; “Harry Potter lives at 93a, Diagon Alley, London.”

As soon as he said the final word, a doorway appeared behind him. The Grangers were stunned, as the door appeared to push the shops on either side of it out of the way.

Harry turned to Hermione and grinned. "It's called the Fidelus charm, Hermione. I've got a book on it upstairs, if you want." She grinned at him.

Considering we've only know each other for less than four months, he knows me too well.

Harry placed his hand on the door, sending a surge of magic through his palm. The door creaked open, sending chills down the spines of the Grangers. Harry turned around. "Sorry... it was just too great a cliché to pass up."

Emma and Dan laughed nervously, while Hermione grinned. Harry passed through the doorway, onto a set of polished wooden stairs. He looked down, seeing an envelope on the ground. He picked it up, and started to make his way up the stairs.

As soon as Harry opened the door to the flat, Emma and Dan were stunned. They were expecting the flat to be something a student would own, furniture barely held together with duct tape, packing boxes used as tables, that sort of thing.

Instead, the flat was sparsely, but tastefully decorated with brand new furniture. A pair of black leather couches sat underneath a long window, while a large television sat along one wall. A crimson throw rug covered a good portion of the hardwood flooring, while a wall to wall bookcase filled the third wall. There were five doors along the final wall, leading to the other rooms. In the centre of the large living room was a fireplace island, built in a sandy-coloured stone. At the back was a set of stairs that led into the fire.

Harry took the group on a brief tour, showing off the master bedroom, decorated in traditional Ravenclaw colours, while the two guest bedrooms were decorated in off-white. The combined kitchen/dining room was all light wood, with a series of cooking devices along one wall. The final room, the bathroom, was white tile, containing an

obscenely large bathtub, a separate shower stall, a toilet cubicle and sink.

All in all, it was a very impressive home, especially for an eleven year old.

“Wow...” Hermione whispered. “This is nice, Harry.”

Emma turned back to Harry. “You live here by yourself?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Who decorated?” Emma refused to believe a child had such good taste.

“Well, I did everything except the bathroom.” Harry replied, looking down at his shoes. “I have many talents. I discovered that tiling is not one of them.”

Dan laughed involuntary. “I know how you feel, son.” He said. “I had to do ours at home. It’s not easy.”

Hermione looked at the bookcase, and back at Harry. He nodded, laughing as she dashed away. “That girl and her books...” He made his way into the kitchen, and opened the fridge. “Would you care for a drink?”

Emma shook her head, bringing herself back to the present. “Uh... coffee would be good.”

Harry flicked his hand at one of the devices lining the kitchen wall, where a popping sound was soon heard.

Hermione had flopped herself onto one of the couches, absorbed in a book about household charms.

Harry entered the living room, passed a delicate china cup and saucer to the Grangers. “Hermione, want a drink?”

She nodded, without looking up from her book. "Do you have any Pumpkin Juice?"

Harry stood in front of her, a large glass of the sweet beverage in hand. She looked up, grinning at him. "You really do know me too well, Harry."

He grinned back, and walked away, grabbing the Grangers' suitcases, and headed into one of the guest rooms.

The Grangers had sat themselves down, impressed despite their earlier protestations. The flat was comfortable, and well adorned.

Harry entered, and dropped onto the couch next to Hermione, who was still engrossed in the book.

"So... Why do you live here alone, Harry?" Emma asked, looking down at her empty coffee cup. It really was the best she'd ever had, and she wanted more, but was too proud to ask.

Harry picked up on her glances, and vanished into the kitchen, coming out with fresh cups for both of them.

He passed them over, and then sat down. "That's quite a long story, ma'am."

Emma took another sip of the heavenly coffee, and settled back. "Indulge me."

So he did. For the next hour, Harry told the story of his life up to that point, downplaying the cruelty of the Dursleys, until Emma was in tears. Hermione had long abandoned her book, and was now snuggling with Harry, after wrapping him in a firm 'Hermi-hug'.

"...which is where you picked us up." Harry concluded.

Dan shook his head. "Let me get this straight. Your parents went into hiding, using the same charm that you are now."

“Yes.” Harry replied. “However, the difference between what my parents did and what I did is simple. They chose to trust the wrong person. My charm is secreted within myself. Had they done that, they would still be alive today.”

Dan nodded. “Right. So, after they were attacked, the Headmaster placed you with your abusive relatives, then didn’t check on you for ten years.

“You turn up at school, don’t tell him that you’ve moved house. Then, when you’re going home, and he finds out you don’t live with the abusive monsters anymore, he tries to stop you from going to your own house. He then sends a letter to that big ape, to come and pick you up, telling him that you can’t do magic outside of school.”

He looked at Emma, who nodded slightly. “Why the hell are you going back?” He glanced at his daughter. “Why should we send Hermione back to school? It sounds like your Headmaster is an evil, scheming old man.”

Harry held up his hands, stopping the diatribe. “I can understand what you mean, sir, but it’s not like that. Professor Dumbledore’s not evil. He really does have the best of intentions.”

“‘The road to hell’-” Emma started.

“I know.” Harry interrupted. “But, Dumbledore’s been a fighter against evil since 1914. For the last seventy-seven years, he’s fought the good fight. His problem is that he’s lost sight on the individuals. He concentrates on the big picture.” He sighed, and leaned back on the couch. “He really is a great leader, and an excellent tactician. He just doesn’t see the little people anymore.”

Dan leaned back on the other couch. “I still don’t like it.” He muttered.

“Dumbledore’s other major problem is that he sees the best in everyone. He can’t believe that the Dursleys would abuse their own nephew. In the Wizarding world, children are held very dear. Child abuse simply doesn’t happen here. That’s why Dumbledore felt it was safe to leave me with the Dursleys. He believed the best about them.”

Emma shook her head. "I can understand that, and it's nice that there's still people... dreamers, like that. But, that sort of person shouldn't be in charge of a school! If he's always giving second chances, people will never learn that their actions have consequences."

Harry nodded slowly. "I know. And he understands that the Dursleys are uncomfortable about magic. That's why he told them about the underage restrictions. He felt that it would make the Dursleys more comfortable, and therefore, make it safer and easier for me. What he doesn't realise is that the Dursleys would take advantage of the situation, and beat me more."

Hermione wrapped him in another hug, leaving him very emotional. He shook his head, and quickly squeezed her back. He stood up. "Anyway... it's dinner time." He stood, and headed into the kitchen. "Do you all like Lasagne?"

The affirmatives called back. He quickly heated up the oven and the stove, throwing the mince meat in to start to reduce down, while chopping onions and grating the cheese.

An hour later, the quartet were sitting down to dinner. Harry suddenly clicked his fingers, and went to the pantry, pulling out a dusty bottle of red wine. He passed it to Dan, who looked at it, and whistled lightly.

Emma quirked an eyebrow, and whistled when Dan passed her the bottle. "Harry, we can't drink this!"

Harry looked up. "Why? Is there something wrong with it?"

Dan shook his head. "Harry, this goes for something like two hundred pounds a bottle! We can't possibly accept this."

Harry shrugged. "I've got a couple of cases of that sitting in the pantry." He held out his hand, summoning the corkscrew from the rack. "Please, enjoy it."

The adults looked at each, and nodded slowly. "Will you be having any, Harry?"

"Nah." Harry replied casually. "I don't really like wine. The Goblins gave me some when I got emancipated." He shuddered. "Nasty."

Emma looked over at Hermione, who nodded shyly. They poured small measures in each of the three glasses, enjoying the smooth bouquet and taste.

Dan started to eat, moaning when he tasted the first bite. "Harry, did you make this from scratch?"

Harry nodded, taking up a forkful for himself.

Emma took a bite, and stopped chewing almost immediately. "Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Can we move in with you?" Emma asked, with a straight face.

Dan nodded. "And can you cook all the time?"

Hermione just grinned, taking a large forkful of her own. She chewed slowly, before swallowing. "Harry, this is better than at Hogwarts!"

Harry just blushed, and looked down. "It's only a Lasagne." He muttered. "I made a cheesecake for dessert."

Dan grinned. "Okay, we can sell the house in a few weeks, give the practice time to be sold..."

Harry's face shot up. Emma and Dan started laughing. "We're kidding, Harry." Dan said, scooping up another forkful. "But, this is good."

"Cooking for the Dursleys has to have some benefits." Harry muttered, drinking from his water glass.

The two adults looked at each other guiltily, before carrying on eating in silence.

After dinner, and having been unceremoniously shooed out of Harry's kitchen, the three Grangers sat on the couch, looking troubled.

"He's a good kid." Emma muttered.

Hermione nodded. "He's great." She said dreamily.

Emma looked at Dan, smiling gently. They recognised the signs of a school-yard crush when they saw it, and were secretly happy to see them on their book-obsessed daughter.

Harry came bustling into the living room, wiping his hands on a piece of kitchen towel, which he threw into the fireplace.

"So, do you guys have anything planned for tonight?" Harry asked, almost throwing himself onto the couch.

Emma shook her head. "Nope. Nothing. Why? Did you have something in mind?"

Harry grinned shyly. "I thought we could go and get a Christmas tree and decorations."

Hermione clapped her hands together in delight, closely followed by her mother, while her father grinned. "That sounds like an excellent idea, Harry."

As soon as Dan finished speaking, the group had grabbed coats and cloaks, and stepped out into the cold.

"You have got to be bloody kidding me!" A voice cried out from underneath a pile of green fern.

Hermione giggled, taking a large step back. "Harry?"

"Buggering bollocking shite..." He murmured. His head popped through the branches, his glasses hanging half-off his nose, and his hair adorably mussed up. "Hermione, sweetie?" He asked in a sickly-sweet voice.

Hermione's giggles had taken over, especially when she saw his face appear through the greenery. "Yes, Harry?"

He looked down at the base of the tree. "Would you Diffindo a bit off the bottom here? Then Leviosa it, while I get the pot in place?"

Hermione wielded her wand, the silver cutting beam taking a few inches off the bottom of the tree, then levitated the tree, while Harry grabbed the tree-stand, and forced it underneath. Hermione let the tree down, sighing in relief when it sat on its own.

Emma and Dan had fallen onto the couch laughing at the spectacle. Harry tried to flatten his hair, put his glasses back on and came out from behind the tree, knocking pine needles off his sleeves.

He glared at the two adults, who'd been no bloody help at all. "Why is it an eight foot tree doesn't fit under an eight foot roof?" He bitched gently. "Can someone please explain it to me?"

Both adults shook their heads, before dissolving into laughter once again.

"Why did you have to get a real tree, Harry?" Hermione asked, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Wouldn't a plastic one have been easier?"

Harry took her hand, and led her to the middle of the living room. "Close your eyes, and take a deep breath, Hermione. Tell me what you can smell?" She followed his command, closing her eyes and inhaling deeply.

"Well... I can smell the fire... I can still smell that Lasagne, which is making me hungry... Dad's aftershave... Mum's perfume... your deodorant..." She opened her eyes and grinned at him. "Pine. Got it."

Harry nodded. "I've always wanted to smell the pine needles at Christmas. The Dursleys used a plastic tree, which was white, and looked a bit pathetic. So, I decided when I got my own place, I'd have a proper tree, with proper decorations." He picked up the box of fairy lights, quite eager to see the reaction from the Muggle adults.

He opened the box, allowing the fairies to fly free, and find their own place on the tree, before they settled down.

“What the hell?” Dan asked, getting up and going over to the tree. “Are these actual fairies?”

Harry nodded. “Yep.”

Emma got up, and joined her husband. “Isn’t it cruel having live creatures adorn your tree?”

“No.” Harry shook his head. “Fairies actually live for centuries. Every year, before Christmas, they make their way to a factory to be boxed up. If they’re not sold by Christmas Eve, they leave the factory and decorate public Christmas trees.”

“But... they’re living beings...” Dan stammered. “And you’re using them.”

“Mr. Granger, trust me. They like being here.” Harry reached out to the tree, holding out his hand. One of the fairies leapt off the tree, landing on his palm. “Unlike most beings, fairies don’t actually eat food. They get their life giving energy from the ambient magic in a place. Right now, they’re feeding off the magical energy that me and Hermione are putting out. Watch.” He placed the fairy back in the tree, and closed his eyes. He started to glow with a pale white light, causing the fairies to glow brighter.

“That’s why fairies willingly place themselves into boxes.” Harry started to rummage in his bags, pulling out baubles and tinsel, and started to decorate his tree.

When the last baubles were on, Harry waved his wand, turning off the lights in the apartment, leaving the fairies’ glow the sole illumination.

Emma stood up next to her husband, who wrapped an arm around her shoulders. He glanced over at Hermione, who was stood in the exact same pose as them, with her head on Harry’s shoulder, while Harry rested his head against hers.

Emma smiled at her husband. "Give it ten years, they'll be stood in that exact same pose, but with rings on their fingers." She whispered.

– CHAPTER THIRTEEN –

The “Talk”

“Harry?” Dan asked. The two young men were shopping on their own, while the ladies were doing... something that involved a lot of money.

“Yes, Mr. Granger?” Harry replied. He was peering through the window of Flourish and Blotts, sudden inspiration hitting him of what he could get Hermione for Christmas.

“I’d like to ask you a very personal question.” Dan said, wringing his hands together.

Harry looked up, noticing the look that Dan was giving him. Oh, shit. The ‘overprotective dad’ skit. Just what I don’t need. For christ’s sake, I’m eleven! “I reserve the right to not give you a personal answer, sir.” He answered politely.

Dan nodded, then blurted out his question. “What are your intentions towards my daughter?”

Crap. Crap. Crap. Didn’t want to get into this right now. “Why don’t we head to the Leaky Cauldron, sir? Discuss this over drinks?”

Dan nodded, and led the way.

Nursing a FireWhiskey, while Harry partook of a Butterbeer, the two men carried on their conversation.

Harry took a pull on his drink, then leaned back. “Shall we get straight to brass tacks, Mr. Granger?”

Dan nodded, taking a sip of his FireWhiskey, before breathing rapidly, trying to get rid of the burning sensation. Harry took pity on him, and lit the remainder with his wand, burning off a good portion of the alcohol content. “That would be good, Harry.”

“Okay, then. I like your daughter. She’s my best friend. If I’m honest, she’s about the only person in the Wizarding world that I’d consider a friend. Do I like her in a romantic way? I don’t know.” He gestured to himself. “I mean, I’m only eleven years old. Hormones are only now starting to kick in. Do I care for her?” He thought for a moment. “Yes, I do. She’s very dear to me, sir. When we’re both old enough, would I like to become involved with her? I’d say... yes, I would.”

Dan nodded. It was very disconcerting to him to have this discussion with the most mature eleven year old he’d ever met. Harry acted more like an adult that he did sometimes.

“I understand that, Harry. I appreciate your honesty in the matter.”

Harry nodded, then took another drink. “We do share things in common, sir. We both have an intense desire to protect your daughter. We both care for her a great deal. Neither of us wants to see her hurt.” Dan nodded. “What happens in the future is very much up to Hermione. Right now, I’m happy to be her friend.”

“Are you playing with her affections, Harry?” Dan asked, looking intently at him.

Leaning back in his chair, Harry looked thoughtfully at the older man. “Are you asking if I’m manipulating her, sir?” Dan nodded. “Well... I suppose the answer to that question would have to be yes.”

Dan leaned back, his eyes narrowing to slits. “You’re manipulating her?”

Harry nodded. “In a way... yes. In the same way that you manipulated Mrs. Granger when you first started dating.”

“I’ll give you a minute to explain that statement, Harry... then I’ll become quite annoyed.”

Harry simply shrugged, looking remarkably unconcerned. “When you first started dating your wife, sir, did you not do subtle things to improve her opinion of you? Spend a little longer in the shower than you would normally? Wear a better brand of aftershave? Not eat

foods that would give you wind when you were on a date with her? Not laugh at fart jokes, even though you found them funny?"

Dan nodded slowly, finally understanding what Harry meant. "I suppose so."

"In that case, yes, sir. I'm manipulating your daughter. I'm toning down my bad habits, like leaving socks all over the house, or flicking spitballs at the telly when I don't like the program."

"I understand." Dan said slowly, taking another sip of his drink. "Do anything to hurt her and I'll kill you." He said politely.

Harry snorted. "You'd be third in line, Mr. Granger, after myself and Hermione."

Finishing off his FireWhiskey, Dan stood up, holding out his hand to Harry. The younger man shook it, before standing himself. "Come on, Harry. Bit more shopping to do." He suppressed a laugh as Harry groaned in protest.

After Harry picked up his gifts, moaning all the way about carrying heavy things, the two staggered back to Harry's flat, letting themselves in and flopping unceremoniously onto the couches. When the chime sounded, indicating that the ladies had returned, Harry swore under his breath, grabbing his packages and dashing into his bedroom, hiding them in cupboards, before casting wards over them. Just in case.

Emma came in, holding one small bag, followed by Hermione, breathless and pink-cheeked from the cold. Harry came back into the living room, stopping when he saw his best friend stood there. Damn, she looks cute!

Shaking off the thought, he went into the kitchen, preparing hot drinks for everyone.

Dan pulled Emma into their guest room, and sat down on the bed, after making sure the door was fully closed.

Emma looked at him curiously. "What's wrong, sweetie?"

"I asked Harry what his intentions towards Hermione are." Dan said simply, waiting for the inevitable outcry from his wife. He got it.

"Oh, Dan, you didn't!" She cried, one hand flying up to her mouth. "Didn't you think? I mean, we're staying in this man's apartment, and you have to go and ask him that." She thought about what she'd said. "When did I start thinking of an eleven year old as a man?"

Dan chuckled. "Probably about the same time I did, when we first walked into his flat. It's the first time I've ever met a forty-year old child." He sniggered. "Apart from your father, that is."

Emma slapped him absently, while sitting on the bed next to her husband. She looked at him slyly. "What did he say?"

Dan sighed, running his hand through his hair. "Annoyingly, all the things I wanted to hear. I'm the father of a little princess. I'm not supposed to like anybody that shows an interest in her."

"That bad?" Emma asked, smiling sympathetically.

"He told me that he cares for her, wants to protect her, and doesn't want to see her hurt. When he's old enough, he wants to date her." He huffed impotently. "Then he said the worst thing of all..."

Emma stiffened. "What?"

"He said it's all up to Hermione." He slumped back, burying his face in his hands. "Why couldn't he be aggressive and nasty? I know how to deal with people like that! He's nice and understanding... damn it, the perfect son-in-law. And he's eleven!" He pouted. "I'm not supposed to like him, and I do."

Rubbing her husband's back, Emma smiled at him. "I like him, too, sweetie." She hugged him briefly. "I'm sure we'll get plenty of invites to dinner." She thought back to their first meal. "Especially if he makes that cheesecake again."

A knock on the door brought both adults back to the present. "Coffee." A voice shouted. Emma was on her feet and halfway to the door in the blink of an eye, desperate to get her hands on Harry's special blend of caffeine.

Hermione followed Harry into the kitchen, pathetically trying to glimpse what presents Harry had bought. She grabbed the teapot, as Harry fiddled with the kettle and coffee maker. She sat at the table, casually looking around, trying to see what he'd got. As soon as the coffee was ready, he took it to Hermione's parents, before coming back into the kitchen, and pouring water into the teapot.

"Had a conversation with your Dad earlier." Harry commented blandly.

Hermione looked up, blanching at the implication. "Oh, no." She whispered.

"Yes..." Harry looked up, smiling gently at her. "He asked me, in an ever so subtle way, what my intentions were towards you."

Burying her face in her hands in mortification, Hermione started shaking. Perfect... my one friend, and Daddy tries to scare him away.

A pair of gently callused hands took hers away from her face, as Harry knelt down in front of her. "Hey." He said gently. She was still looking down, not daring to meet his gaze. He reached out with one hand, lifting her face up with a finger under her chin, until she was staring directly into his eyes. "What's wrong?"

He couldn't hear exactly what she was mumbling, but did make out the words 'only friend... scare... away'.

He squeezed her hands gently. "I told him the truth, Hermione. I told him that I care for you. That I'll protect you." He leaned a little closer. "I also said I don't want you to get hurt."

She stared into his eyes, before shaking her head slightly, trying to end the spell that had her vision locked. "Thank you, Harry." She whispered.

“He also asked what I thought about dating you.” Harry said, dropping the bombshell on her.

Hermione didn't think her blush could go any further. She was wrong, as all the blood in her body made a bee-line for her cheeks. “And?” She whispered, so softly Harry had to strain to hear her.

He smiled gently. “I said, when the times comes, I'd definitely want to. But, the final decision would be yours.”

She sniffed. Bloody tears! “Why would you want to?” Hermione whispered. “I'm bossy, I'm a know-it-all, I'm controlling, I nag people to death, I can't cook, my cleaning skills are minimal, I kick in my sleep, I slurp my milk from my bowl when done eating my cereal, I burn cookies, I drink 4 cups of coffee with a 2 hour period of time, I have bushy hair, and I bite my finger nails at the dinner table.”

Harry chuckled warmly at her. “Why do you say that like it's a bad thing?” He asked. “You're not bossy, you're assertive. You're not a know-it-all, you're simply intelligent.” He looked away for a moment. “Frighteningly intelligent.” He murmured, before turning back to her. “You nag people to death? Let's be honest, I need someone to nag me to death.”

He looked blank for a moment, as he reviewed the list she had given him. “Uh... you can't cook. I love cooking. Cleaning skills? You can see from my home that I have more than adequate cleaning skills.”

Hermione smiled at Harry as he countered each of her arguments. He was far too good at this. She had finally met her match. And she liked it.

“As for the coffee, you've seen me attack the jugs in the morning at school. I can drink it 'til it flows out of my ears.” He reached up, and gently stroked the side of her head, running his fingers through her hair. “As to your hair, I love it. I don't think of it as 'bushy'. I think of it as 'untameable'. Like you.”

Her heart melted at his sweet words. The two children heard a throat clearing from the doorway. She looked up to see her parents with

sappy grins on their faces. Her blush intensified again as she saw their knowing glances. "How much of that did you hear?" She asked.

"All of it." Emma replied, beaming at her daughter. She looked at Harry, and scooped him into a hug. He squealed for a moment, before getting his feet back under him, and hugged her back tentatively. "You're a good boy, Harry." She gave a final squeeze, suddenly letting go when she heard a 'crack' from his back.

Harry couldn't help it; he moaned in pleasure when the last knot in his back suddenly cleared itself. He straightened up, putting his glasses back on the centre of his nose, after Emma's aggressive hug had knocked them off.

Dan held out his hand to Harry, one man to another. Harry looked down for a moment, then shook it. If he understood the gesture correctly, Dan was giving him tacit approval.

He took his hand back, shaking it to get the feeling back. "Who's up for dinner?"

The next few days passed in a blur of games, talks, excellent meals, and several hours of some old cartoon Harry called 'Thundercats'. He admitted, for all his maturity, he loved the silly cartoon, and had several video tapes filled with the comic adventures.

Christmas morning woke up the foursome at roughly the same time. Harry showered and dressed, then headed into the kitchen, the smell and taste of bacon sandwiches running rampant through his mind. While the bacon was cooking, he started preparing for dinner, peeling vegetables and leaving them in pans of water, ready to cook. He'd started on the Turkey the night before, and it was in the oven, waiting for him to start again.

After feeding the group, they trooped into the living room, and sat on the floor around the tree. Harry gingerly reached under the tree, and pulled out two identical, small wrapped presents, which he passed to the adult Grangers.

The two children watched as they unwrapped the gifts, to discover... pocket mirrors. They glanced at each other, not quite sure what to say. Harry immediately picked up on the subtle by-play, and came to the rescue.

"In case you're wondering, they're not just mirrors." He gestured to the wall above the television, where a large, rectangular mirror hung. "Think of them as the Wizarding world's equivalent to a mobile telephone." He stood, and went over to the mirror. He leaned in close, pressing what appeared to be a small button. "Emma Granger." He said firmly.

In Emma's hand, the mirror started vibrating. She looked down, to see a tiny flashing symbol in the bottom-right hand corner. She pressed the button, gasping in shock when Harry's head appeared in the mirror. She looked up, to see her own face in the mirror above the television.

"That's amazing!" She blurted out, to hear her voice echoed a fraction of a second later by the large mirror.

"It's like Star Trek." Hermione said, looking down at the mirror. "You know, those big viewscreens."

Harry nodded. "Cool, isn't it?" He gestured to under the tree. "There's one for you there, Hermione."

Harry sat back down, pulling out more gifts for the older Grangers, a small collection of Muggle and Wizarding alcohol, various chocolates and fragrances, and Gift Vouchers to various stores in the Alley. Harry smiled sheepishly at Hermione's parents. "I'm sorry it's not something a little more personal."

The elder Grangers were stunned. Between them, Harry must have spent thousands of pounds. A case of the wine they had drunk on their first night along was worth almost £2,500! And he was apologising?

"Harry!" Dan finally managed to utter. "It's too much! You can't give us all this?"

Harry cocked his head. "Why not, sir?"

"It's too much!" Dan repeated, looking shocked at Harry's generosity.

Waving his hand in a dismissive gesture, Harry turned to Hermione, pulling a small wrapped box. "This one, I'm really quite proud of." He passed her the box.

Hermione was a bit nervous. After seeing the enormous expense Harry had gone to for her parents, people he'd known for approximately four days, she was dreading to see what he'd do for her. All of a sudden, she was terrified at the crappy present she'd bought him. It wasn't even in the same league.

Tentatively, she opened the parcel, to find a polished wooden box, about the size of a packet of cigarettes, or a bar of soap. She opened it, worried about what was inside. There was... something inside, but she couldn't make it out.

She looked up at Harry, who was watching her open the box. He noted her confusion. "It's a library trunk. The shopkeeper said it'll hold 30,000 books, all stored and available on instant recall." He reached over, and tapped it with his wand, where it grew to the size of a large bread bin. Inside was a series of tiny books, none larger than a postage stamp.

Harry closed the lid, then tapped his wand against an inlaid jewel. "Hogwarts; A History." He said in a firm voice. When he opened the box again, there was a single book inside. He reached in, to pick up a brand-new edition of Hogwarts; A History.

She looked up at him. It was an impressive gift. It wasn't too personal, yet catered to her favourite hobby. "Thank you, Harry." She whispered.

Harry smiled heart-stoppingly. "I thought this'd be good for when you're at home. At least this way, you can hide all of your magical books in case someone comes over." He cocked his head. "And it also contains a complete set of Hogwarts text books."

Hermione couldn't help herself. She gasped. "A complete set?"

"All subjects, all years." Harry replied. "I figured you'd appreciate it."

He'd spent thousands on her! She couldn't believe it. It was the best present she'd ever received! "Harry... I... I can't accept this. It's too much. You shouldn't waste your money on me."

Harry looked offended. "Hermione... first of all, it's not a waste. And please, don't think I'm trying to buy your friendship."

She quickly back-pedalled. "No, I didn't mean it like that. It's just... Harry, I know how much the texts cost. You shouldn't spend that much on me."

"I was looking for good presents for you all. I thought I did pretty well." He sounded dejected, depressed.

I thought they'd like them. Harry got up, and went into the kitchen, turning on the stove, starting to cook the dinner. It feels like being back at the bloody Dursleys. Why can I never get anything right? In the living room, the three Grangers were stunned. As one, they stood up, and headed into the kitchen.

"Harry." Hermione called out. He turned round, trying to mask the tears in his eyes. Without thinking, Hermione wrapped him in a hug, squeezing him tightly.

Dan and Emma were quite shocked. Harry had come off to them as a confident young man. Now, they were seeing the scared little boy that lurked inside of him.

"Harry, you picked excellent presents." Emma said. "To be frank, better than anything we could have got for you. We were shocked, is all."

Hermione squeezed him, then pulled back slightly. "Harry, that's the best present I've ever received. It's perfect. I was just... It's a very expensive present."

Harry shrugged, sniffing slightly. "I just picked stuff I thought you'd like. Wasn't looking at the price tag."

Dan spoke up. "You did an excellent job at that, Harry. It's just way more than we were expecting. Please, don't feel bad. We were just..."

Harry sniffled again, wiping his eyes on a tea-towel. "If you don't want them, it's okay. You don't have to pretend to like them." Christ, I sound like a petulant child! Suck it up, Potter!

Hermione grabbed his hand, and pulled him back to the tree. The two adult Grangers followed, quite in awe of the young man. Hermione grabbed her present to him from under the tree, and thrust it into his hands. "Open it!" She hissed.

Quite intimidated, Harry complied. As soon as the paper came off, he grinned. "Quidditch armour! All right!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You're a prat, Harry. Can you understand why we're shocked? One of those communication mirrors costs more than my whole present to you!"

Harry shrugged. "So? You picked a cool present, that you know I'll use." He looked down, rubbing the armour. "And you got the good one, too. Acrylic and dragon hide. Excellent combination for a seeker."

Dan looked up. "Does that really make a difference?"

"Does it make a difference?" Harry snorted. "A 25lb cannon ball approaching you at 80 miles an hour. Yeah, Quidditch armour's definitely a plus." He looked up at her. "It's a thoughtful gift, Hermione. I like it."

Dan and Emma shrugged, hoping the young man was now out of his funk. They held up a box, wrapped neatly in Muggle paper. "This is

nothing like what you got for us, Harry.” Emma said. “But, from what Hermione’s told us, we think you’ll like it.”

Harry tore into the paper, flipping the lid off the box. What he saw stunned him. He looked up at Emma. “Where the hell did you find these?”

Emma grinned. “That would be telling, Harry. Do you like them?”

Hermione peered over Harry’s shoulder to look in the box, where fourteen rather old-looking books were resting side-by-side. “Who’s Ian Fleming?” She asked.

Harry look scandalised. “Hermione! I’m shocked at you!” He reached into the box, and pulled out the first of the books. “My god... it’s a first edition!”

“They all are.” Dan said, sitting looking rather smug.

Harry looked up, child-like adoration on his face. “Thank you.” His mouth flapped for a few moments. “I don’t know what to say.”

Flopping down on the floor next to him, Hermione rapped him on the back of the head. “Who’s Ian Fleming?”

“Only one of the greatest English writers of all time, Hermione.” Harry replied. “He wrote the James Bond books.” He looked down. “And now, I’ve got them all.” He cackled. “This is brilliant. Thank you.”

Dan and Emma grinned at each other.

Harry turned to Hermione. “Since you’ll probably be taking your library trunk back to school, can I keep these in there? I don’t want them to get damaged.”

“Fiction, Harry?” Hermione raised her eyebrow, and looked down her nose at him. “I’m appalled. What would Professor Flitwick say?”

Without missing a beat, Harry replied. "He'd say: 'Can I borrow them when you're finished with them, please?'" Harry laughed. "He's as big a fan as I am."

"James Bond." Hermione rolled her eyes. "Boys and their toys."

"You know it." Harry replied, gazing down at the books.

Hermione pulled her parents to one side once Harry went back into the kitchen... with his box of Bond books. Every so often, she'd catch him staring at them, a glazed look in his eyes.

"Where did you find them?" Hermione asked her mother.

Emma peeked round the corner, seeing Harry engrossed with the vegetables, stopping to peer at his books. "We found them in a Charity shop a few doors down from the Cauldron. Cost twenty pounds." She glanced at Dan. "Considering what he spent on us, feel kinda bad about it."

Hermione glanced out, seeing Harry gently stroking the spines of the books. "I wouldn't. He'll be nursing a semi over those for days." She said absently.

Emma gasped. "Hermione Jane Granger! Where did you learn that phrase?"

Grimacing, Hermione looked up at her mother. "Uh... one of the boys at school was shouting it."

Dan tried to look stern... really, he did. But failed, especially when he saw the love-struck expression on Harry's face. "Much as I'd like to argue with you, Hermione, I agree. I think you should put them in your new trunk. He'll never concentrate if he keeps staring at them."

Hermione left the living room, when the adult Grangers heard a cry of protest in the kitchen. Hermione came in a few moments later, hair mussed, carrying the box of books. She had a silly grin on her face, which slowly faded as she locked the books away. She tapped the

trunk with her wand, shrinking it back down to it's cigarette-sized form, and putting it into the pocket of her jeans.

A visibly upset Harry Potter came into the living room, pouting outrageously at Hermione. "Dinner will be ready in about two hours." He said sulkily. He picked up the Quidditch armour. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go to my room and cry."

He disappeared, leaving Emma to look at Hermione. "Will he be okay?"

Hermione's silly grin returned full-force. "He'll be fine. I told him he could have the books back when we go back to school. If he behaves himself."

Harry's head popped out of his doorway. "Your daughter's evil, you know. For the good of humanity, she should be destroyed." His head vanished, and they heard the sounds of his cupboard closing. Harry came back into the room, discretely looked around for his new box of beloved books. "Hermione? Sweetie?"

Hermione looked back at him, fluttering her eyelashes. "Yes, Harry?" She asked in a sweet voice.

"You, uh... you wouldn't know where my books are, would you?"

"Yes, Harry." She replied, still fluttering her eyelashes.

"Any chance I could have one to read now?" He asked, pouting and giving her his 'puppy dog' eyes.

Resist! Resist! Oh... he's so cute... no, resist! Hermione's brain screamed at her. It was difficult, but she managed. Only just, though. "I told you when you can have them back. You'll just have to behave yourself."

He pouted, then flopped on the couch next to her. "You're evil!" He started to tickle her, sending her into a fit of giggles.

A flash of flames interrupted the tickle fight, which Harry was winning quite handily. Harry leapt to his feet, wand in hand, aiming at the interloper.

“Fawkes.” He said softly. In the bird’s beak was a package wrapped in brown paper, while a small note was attached to his leg.

Emma and Dan scurried back at the sight of a bird which arrived by fire. Harry took the package, and untied the note, glancing over at the Grangers. “It’s okay. He’s a Phoenix. They can travel from one place to another by flames. Makes them very hard to track, and very secure messengers.” He started to open the letter. “Makes me wonder why he’s here.”

“Who’s is he?” Hermione asked, tentatively reaching out to stroke the bird. Fawkes, being the disgusting flirt he was, allowed Hermione complete access. Shortly afterwards, all three Grangers were petting the bird, causing him to let out a trill of pleasure.

Harry was reading the note. “He’s Dumbledore’s familiar.” He said absently. “You can’t really ‘own’ a Phoenix. They come to you when needed. Fawkes joined Dumbledore during his war with Grindelwald back in the ‘40s.”

The note was brief.

Dear Harry,

I would like to arrange a meeting with you when you return to school from your Christmas holidays. It has to do with why I would like you to return to the Dursleys during the summer.

There are also a few other things we need to discuss upon your return, notably what to do about Professor Snape. Since your proclamations, he has been unable to be as effective a teacher as required, and we would like you to drop your proclamations, so that Professor Snape is able to deal with the older, more unruly students. Since this is now taking up a great portion of his time, he is unable to support the younger students, resulting in a drop in the efficiency of their education.

I would like to thank you for the gift you sent me. Every year, I receive countless new books, but you are the first person to supply me with warm woollen socks in a long time. How did you know? I look forward to finding out upon your return.

The package that Fawkes is bringing to you is something that your father left in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well.

A very merry Christmas, my boy.

Albus Dumbledore.

Harry snorted as he read the information about Snape. He passed the note to Hermione, who read it, and looked at him in confusion.

Hermione read the note, and passed it to her mother. Emma read it, and looked up. "What does it mean about Professor Snape?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "During our first Potions lesson, Professor Snape was really quite nasty. He asked me questions from the second year textbook, the fourth year text, and a NEWT level question. Basically, he comes across as angry, mean, and quite useless as a teacher. He doesn't teach, he just throws it at you. I also heard, unofficially, mind you, that he hold private lessons for the Slytherin students, so that they actually learn Potions. With the injunctions I placed, Snape can't give or take points from any student, nor can he issue a detention, until I've submitted my formal complaint to the Board of Directors."

"You haven't done that yet?" Hermione asked.

Harry smirked. "It must have slipped my mind." He grinned cheekily. "I was planning on making it last a little longer, to be honest."

Hermione smirked. "How much longer?"

"Oh... sometime around the end of my seventh year."

“And you say I’m evil.” Hermione snorted.

“You are.” Harry mock-glared at her. “You’ve hidden my books. An evil thing to do to a Ravenclaw.” He turned to Fawkes. “Can you make sure you never bring him here without permission, Fawkes?”

The bird nodded, before launching into the air, and vanishing in a trail of fire.

“So... where were we? Oh, that’s right...” Harry asked, before grabbing Hermione, and starting to tickle her again.

– CHAPTER FOURTEEN –

The Return to School

Harry knocked on the door to Professor Dumbledore's office, waiting for the inevitable signal to be let in.

"Come in." Harry opened the door, and stopped in his tracks. In front of him were all four House Heads, as well as Professor Dumbledore.

"Is this a bad time, sir?" Harry asked politely, hovering in the doorway.

Dumbledore waved in a magnanimous gesture. "Not at all, Harry. Please, come in and sit down."

Harry sat in the hard wooden chair, gazing at each of the teachers coolly, before glancing over at Fawkes. "So, sir. What can I do for you?"

Dumbledore peered down his nose at Harry. "As I mentioned in the letter I sent to you at Christmas, my boy, I need you to reverse the proclamations you made against Professor Snape. It's making his job too difficult."

McGonagall sniffed. "Albus, we have yet to hear why he did this."

Snape snorted. "Does it matter? He's just as arrogant as his father! Always expecting people to do whatever he wants, whene-"

"Have you finished?" Harry interrupted, drawing rude glances from the other professors. "I will be happy to explain my reasons, but if Professor Snape is unable to control himself, I'll have no choice but to keep the proclamations in place."

Dumbledore raised his hand at Severus, indicating a need for silence.

Harry felt a tingle at the back of his mind, which he quickly slapped away. Without glancing at Snape, he pulled a Muggle notebook and fountain pen from his pocket, and made a brief note, after checking the time on his wrist watch.

"What are you doing, Mr. Potter?" Flitwick asked.

Harry held up the notebook. "This lists the 134 attempts Professor Snape has made to penetrate my mind by Legilimency. Since this is illegal to do without express permission, even more illegal to attempt on a minor, and way more illegal to do to the Head of a Noble and Ancient family, I have been recording these attempts."

"Legilimency?" McGonagall asked, her tone going ice-cold. "You've been using Legilimency on students?"

Dumbledore sighed. He could have done without this coming into the open. "Professor McGonagall, it is sometimes necessary to monitor the thoughts of some of the students, especially in Slytherin house."

McGonagall's head whipped to the Headmaster. "You knew about this?"

Harry was considering whether or not to reveal the six attempts Dumbledore had made to penetrate his mind, as far back as the Sorting feast in September... but decided against it. He didn't want to cause a revolution at the school.

McGonagall carried on. "Albus, you know this is illegal. Why haven't the students complained?" Her tone became frostier. "Or have they complained... and you've hidden it?"

Dumbledore sat back, deeply offended. "Minerva, if a student makes a complaint to me, I treat it with the utmost respect. I most certainly would not suppress or hide a student complaint... And I'm rather insulted at your accusation."

Harry cleared his throat, bringing the attention of the 'adults' in the room back to himself. McGonagall shot Dumbledore a 'We'll discuss this later' glare, before softening her expression back at Harry.

"You were asking me about the proclamations." Harry said politely. "Before I answer that question, I'd like to ask you some questions, if I may?"

The other three House Heads nodded. Harry turned to his Head of House. "Professor Flitwick. If, during your very first lesson, you asked me to explain the Accio charm, and I answered it correctly, would you award me house points?"

Flitwick nodded. "Of course I would. It's a fourth-year charm. But, I'd never ask you about that during your first lesson."

Harry turned to the Herbologist. "Professor Sprout, would you ask me about Mandagoria plants during your first lesson?" She shook her head. "And if you did ask me a question and I answered it correctly, would you award me points?" She nodded.

"Professor McGonagall. During your first lesson, you ask me questions about the Animagus transformation. I answer them correctly. Would you award me points?"

McGonagall nodded sharply. "I would. And I'd ask how you got that knowledge."

Harry grinned at her. "I'm a Ravenclaw, ma'am. We like knowledge." He turned to Snape. "Why did you not award me points considering you asked me questions from second, fourth and NEWT level potions?"

Snape snarled at him. Harry ignored it. After facing Voldemort's glare, Snape couldn't compete.

"Why did you instead take points from me, for being a 'know-it-all smart arse'?"

McGonagall's head whipped round so sharply, Harry swore he could hear the sound. "What? That's not what he told us."

Harry sniggered. "Of course it isn't. After all, how could the son of James Potter know anything?" He snorted. "And that's the problem with Professor Snape. He has not once yet looked at me and seen Harry. He only sees James." His tone hardened. "A man who has been dead for over ten years."

Snape drew his wand. "Your arrogance-"

"Severus." Dumbledore's smooth voice cut through Snape's. "Is this true?"

"Of course not!" Snape snarled. "He's lying! He's just doing it for the attention-"

"Put a sock in it, Snivellus!" Harry snapped. "I know all about why you hate my father, but I don't know why you're taking it out on me!" He took a deep breath. "I would be prepared to remove the proclamations, provided several conditions are met."

All five adults leaned back slightly at the thought of an eleven-year old setting 'conditions' on a professor.

"And what would those be?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry smiled evilly. "First of all, Professor Snape is removed as the Slytherin Head of House. He's biased towards them, which is why they have won the House Cup for the last eight years."

"What?" The other three House Heads stared at Snape, who squirmed uncomfortably in his chair.

Harry stood up, and went over to the Sorting Hat. "Adrian, could I have the punishment book, please?" The Sorting Hat animated, and looked down at Harry.

"Of course, Mr. Potter. Are you well?"

"Not bad, Adrian. Thank you for asking. Yourself? Did you have a good Christmas?" Harry replied, picking up the heavy tome that had materialised in front of him.

"I did. I must say, Mr. Potter, it's the first time I've ever received a gift." The Hat smiled. "I feel like a new hat again. Thank you."

Harry chuckled. "I thought you'd appreciate it. Is it comfortable?"

“Oh, yes. Very.” The Hat nodded, before fading back into its normal static state.

Turning back, Harry noted the gob-smacked expressions on the teachers’ faces. “What?”

“You bought the Sorting Hat a present?” Flitwick squeaked.

“Yeah. I got him some new lining. I thought after a thousand years, he’d appreciate it.” Harry replied, moving back to his chair and sitting down. He opened the tome. “If you’re not sure, this book contains a complete record of all punishments given to students, either detentions or point removals.” He opened the book to Snape’s section.

“Now... let’s see. In the last eight years, Professor Snape has awarded Slytherin House over six thousand points. He’s removed...” Harry looked back at the book, suppressing a groan. “He’s removed a total of four points from Slytherin House.” He looked up at Snape, glaring nastily. “Four points.”

Harry turned the page. “In the meantime, he’s awarded sixty-seven points to Gryffindor, while removing five thousand, seven hundred and nine, uh... eighty-nine points to Ravenclaw, while removing two thousand, four hundred and six, and he’s given forty-one points to Hufflepuff, while removing three thousand, six hundred and eighteen.” He turned to another section of the book. “Let’s see... he’s given nine detentions to Slytherin students, while he’s given over a thousand to the other Houses.” Harry slammed the book closed, and dropped it onto Dumbledore’s desk.

“I don’t believe that removing Professor Snape from his Head of House duties is unreasonable.” He leaned back. “I also believe that Professor Snape should have his lessons monitored by an independent Potions Master, to ensure that his teaching methods are adequate.”

Snape snarled. “How dare you question my teaching methods, Potter!”

Harry shrugged. "I wouldn't know, Snape." He replied casually. "I've never seen them."

Flitwick looked at Harry curiously. "You've had Potions lessons for four months, Mr. Potter."

"Yes," Harry drawled, "but since I don't consider 'instructions are on the board, you have two hours' a teaching method, Professor, I can't really assess Mr. Snape's teaching method." He looked at Snape. "Don't get me wrong. You're a brilliant man, and an excellent Potions Master... but you absolutely suck as a teacher." He threw the final insult at him. "You're too petty."

"Mr. Potter." McGonagall snapped. "Please do not insult Professor Snape. It reflects poorly on us all."

Harry suppressed a grin at McGonagall's 'rebuke'. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm simply calling it as I see it. I mean, I'm eleven, and I don't act as immaturely as he does."

"Nevertheless." Flitwick added. "If you feel a need to insult Severus, please do it in private."

"Of course, sir." Harry grinned at his Head of House.

"Harry." Dumbledore spoke up. "Do you not feel that these measures are a little... strict? Everyone deserves a second chance." He sounded disapproving, as though trying to make Harry feel guilty.

Harry decided to go in for the kill. "Sir, what's that on Professor Snape's left fore-arm?"

Snape hissed at Harry as he covered his arm. Dumbledore looked shocked at Harry's knowledge. "What do you mean?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Professor Snape's already on his second chance, sir. You're asking me to give him a third chance. That, I may be prepared to do, provided he follows the rules I set for him."

"You are in no position to set me rules, Potter!" Snape snarled. "I am your teacher, and you will respect me!"

Harry looked at Dumbledore. "If that's the case, sir, I'll be going now. I've got to get to the Owlery." He glanced at Snape, then back to Dumbledore. "I've got a letter to send to the DMLE." He smirked. "And you need to put an advert out for a new Potions Professor."

"What do you mean, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, his hackles rising.

"Well, my letter to the DMLE will detail Mr. Snape's repeated mind-rape attempts. He'll be in Azkaban by the end of the week." Harry looked nonchalant. "And, unless you're willing to step in and teach Potions, we'll not have anyone instructing us."

Snape pulled his wand, and threw a curse at Harry, who let it hit him. Several deep gashes were along his arms. Flitwick quickly drew his own wand, and disarmed the Potions Master.

Harry shrugged, and pulled his shrunken trunk from his pocket. He enlarged it, and pulled out a camera, which he used to take photographs of his new injuries. He quickly put the camera away, re-shrunk his trunk, and slipped it back into his pocket. He then drew his own wand, gently dragging it across the injuries, healing them up.

"I have four witnesses to an unprovoked attack from a teacher onto a minor. As the Head of House Potter, I can declare a duel against you, Mr. Snape." Harry spoke icily. "What is your response?"

Snape glared at him. "I'll happily duel you, Potter!" He snapped. "Name your time and place."

"I said I could declare a duel, Mr. Snape." Harry replied. "Or, I could use my fame. I know you think I love doing that." He closed his eyes, and leaned back in his chair. "Can you picture the headlines? 'Ex-Death Eater attacks Boy-Who-Lived!'" He opened his eyes. "Has a catchy ring to it, doesn't it?"

“Harry.” Dumbledore sounded both firm, and old and tired. “What do you want? If you know so much about Severus, you know why I have to keep him here at Hogwarts.”

Harry nodded firmly. “Fine. He is to be removed as Head of House immediately. He is to refrain from giving the Slytherin students private potions lessons in their Common Room after hours. He is to have no unsupervised contact with any student, especially myself. Any punishments he wishes to give to a student needs to be confirmed with that student’s Head of House before they are notified of said punishment.”

Flitwick smiled to himself. It was very reasonable, considering.

Dumbledore, on the other hand, was less than impressed. “Mr. Potter. That is too harsh.”

“Take it or leave it, Professor.” Harry replied casually. “Personally, considering I could have his Mastery pulled, and have him either jailed or kissed, I think I’m being pretty reasonable.”

Dumbledore nodded slowly. “Fine.” He sighed. “Is there anything else?”

Harry thought for a moment. “Actually, sir, there is. I would like you to teach all Potions lessons for the next two weeks.”

“Why?” Dumbledore asked warily.

“Sir.” Harry said reproachfully. “I’m aware that you hold a Mastery in Transfiguration, but you’re an Alchemist, first and foremost. I’d like to have some proper lessons. Maybe if Mr. Snape watches a master at work, he’ll be able to do better. I’d like to actually learn Potions, not just be shouted at.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Fine.” He looked at the other House Heads, who shook their heads. “Thank you, Harry. Dismissed.”

Harry nodded, and got up. He nodded at Sprout, McGonagall and Flitwick, and left the room.

Dumbledore turned to Snape. "This is your last chance, Severus. That young man holds far more power than you know."

Snape sneered. "He's an attention-seeking brat! His arrogance is far too out of hand. He should be expelled for threatening a teacher!"

Flitwick, calm, quiet little Flitwick, exploded. "You're lucky you still are a teacher, Severus!" He snapped. "I'll be watching you. If you're not careful, I'll recommend Mr. Potter does have you fired and in Azkaban! In all my years of teaching, I've never seen such a disgraceful display!"

McGonagall joined in. "Cursing a student, just because he disagrees with you? You're lucky I'm willing to listen to Mr. Potter." Her eyes narrowed. "Also, if you use Legilimency on any student, I'll have you in Azkaban before you can say 'Potion'!"

Sprout said nothing, just glaring at the Potions Master, before the three got up, and left the room.

"Albus, you can't be serious!" Snape snapped.

"I am." Dumbledore said firmly. "You are hereby removed as Head of Slytherin House. You are to have no contact with students unless authorised and supervised by their Head of House. You will not give any punishment unless authorised by that student's Head. Are we clear?"

Snape pouted. "Fine." He spat, before getting up and leaving the room.

Harry headed back to the Ravenclaw Common Room, a spring in his step, whistling a jaunty tune. He approached the Portrait Hole, wondering what today's question would be.

"Which of the Founders wielded a sword?" The portrait asked.

"Godric Gryffindor." Harry answered.

“Pass.” The portrait opened, granting Harry access. As soon as he passed through, he saw Hermione sitting on one of the love seats near the fireplace.

“Harry?” A voice called from his left. He turned to see Cho Chang, with Marietta Edgecomb hovering in the background.

“What’s up, Cho?” Harry asked, stopping.

“Why don’t you come and sit with us, Harry?” Cho asked, smiling demurely.

“Uh... ‘cause I wanna go and sit with Hermione.” Harry replied.

“Why?” Cho was insulted. She’d spent hours on getting her hair and makeup right. She wanted to look good for the Boy-Who-Lived, after all.

“‘Cause she’s my friend.” Harry replied in a slow voice.

“Harry,” Cho began confidently. “she’s a buck-toothed, bushy-haired little know-it-all! Why would you want to hang out with her, when you can hang out with me?”

Harry grinned, and leaned close to Cho, who felt her heart start to beat faster. Was he going to kiss her? When he was next to her ear, he whispered. “Because she, unlike you, is worth it.” He straightened up, and walked over to Hermione, ignoring the second-year burst into tears behind him.

Hermione looked up to see Harry approaching, and smiled. “Hey, Harry. How did it go?” Behind them, Cho ran for the stairs to her dorm room, Marietta close behind her, slowing to give Harry a glare, before she chased after her.

“What’s that about?” Hermione asked, looking after the two girls in confusion.

“Uh... that may be my fault.” Harry admitted, a hint of shame in his cheeks. “They asked me to go and sit with them.”

Hermione's face dropped, ever so slightly, before she masked her hurt. "And?"

"And I said I was coming over here to you." He pondered whether to reveal Cho's next words, then decided to go for it. "She then said that you were a buck-toothed, bushy-haired know-it-all, and I shouldn't hang out with you."

"Oh." Hermione was a little upset that the pretty second year had just dismissed her like that.

"Then I said something which... well, I can't say she took it the wrong way, 'cause that'd be a lie." Harry leaned close, and whispered in her ear. "I said that you, unlike her, are worth it." He leaned back.

I will not cry. I will not cry. Hermione said to herself. When Harry wrapped her in a hug, she started to cry. Okay, I will cry. Bugger it.

"Don't cry, Hermione." Harry said, unsure why she was crying.

She sniffled on his sleeve. "It's okay, Harry. These are good tears."

What the hell are good tears? Harry asked himself. Why are there good tears? Why can't girls ever be simple to figure out. "Uh... okay?"

Hermione pulled back, keeping her hands held in his. "You don't understand girls, Harry?" She asked mockingly. "I'm shocked. I thought you were really clever."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Hermione, not even girls understand girls." He leaned back, waiting for the inevitable swat. "Seriously, what are happy tears?"

Author's Note: Okay, this is pretty much all that I've written so far. As such, updates will be a little slower, since I don't have another 35,000 words pre-typed and ready to go. The next chapter, however, will be based on something a review asked me: Why hasn't Hermione, smartest witch of her generation, asked why Harry seems to know so much? Also, Dumbledore's not been asking many questions as to how an essentially Muggle-raised wizard knows so much about the

Wizarding world and it's politics. Coming soon, on a computer near you!

– CHAPTER FIFTEEN –

Conversations in the Aftermath

Hermione, laying in her dorm room, sat and pondered the mystery that was Harry Potter. During her brief time at Hogwarts, Harry Potter had been a mystery, wrapped in an enigma, with a riddle as a bow on top.

How does he know how to do all these things? He's never really sat down and explained. How could any first year transfigure a match into a needle so easily? And then explain it to her like it was nothing? How could that same first year then transfigure a needle into a javelin? Without breaking a sweat?

He had utterly destroyed Professor Snape's authority during his very first class, and then removed him from his Head of House duties. How did he know this? How could he do all the things he'd done?

Christmas was another revelation for her. The gift she'd been given would have been enough to almost-bankrupt her parents, and he'd given it to her without a second thought.

Who is Harry Potter?

Dumbledore sat in his office, dealing with the Administivia that came with running a large school. Inside, however, his thoughts were in turmoil. He was thinking about the mystery of the 'Boy-Who-Lived'.

He'd hoped, by putting him with the Dursleys a decade ago, that Harry would be a nice, pliable child, open to receiving the training he'd need to truly defeat Voldemort. He was hoping that Harry would not be an arrogant idiot, like the Malfoy spawn that was attempting to take control of Slytherin House.

Instead, what he got baffled him. Harry had Occlumency shields in place that Dumbledore could only dream of. He exhibited a degree of magical control that was far beyond an eleven-year old, especially one who'd been introduced to the Wizarding world less than six months before.

How is any of this possible? Dumbledore pondered for a moment, before realising that he had a source of knowledge sitting in his very office.

With nary a word, he pulled the Sorting Hat off its shelf, and placed it onto his head.

Bee in your bonnet, Headmaster?

“Adrian, I have need of your guidance.” Dumbledore said sagely.

And what would you like to know?

“What can you tell me about Harry Potter?”

As you are aware, Headmaster, the contents of people’s minds is private. I cannot share with you the information I gained during his Sorting.

“Well... what can you tell me?”

Only this; do not attempt to manipulate the boy, Headmaster. He has an impressive grasp of his magical skills, and his morality is exceptional. Do you want him to respect you?

“What kind of question is that?” Dumbledore asked, indignantly. “I am one of the greatest wizards in the world!”

And young Mr. Potter respects your position, Headmaster. However, there is a wide margin between respecting the position, and respecting the man who holds that position. So, I ask you again. Do you want Mr. Potter to respect you, or just the position you hold?

“Me.” Dumbledore whispered.

Then heed this warning, Headmaster, for I am not in the habit of dispensing them twice; Mr. Potter is a powerful wizard, probably more powerful than you are. Treat him with the respect he deserves as the

Head of House Potter, and as an adult wizard. For when he came to me, he was the least child-like of his peers.

“Are you saying he’s not himself?” That was one of the things Dumbledore was worried about Harry. He could have potentially been possessed by Voldemort during that fateful day.

Oh, he’s nothing but Harry James Potter. The Hat replied smugly. But you’ll find he’s nothing like the rest of the children in this school.

“Then what do you mean?”

Have you looked into his past, Headmaster? You placed him with his relatives, did you not check up on him?

“I had an agent close-by.”

And what did they report to you? The Hat didn’t give him a chance to reply. My advice is to get to know him, as himself. Not the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’, or some ignorant child. Get to know him, and there may yet be hope for you.

Dumbledore removed the Hat, which faded back into its static form. “I shall do as your recommend.”

On the far side of his desk, one of the spindley little devices began to chime, emitting a puff of smoke. Dumbledore strode round the desk, relaxing slightly when he recognised which ward it was. “Why not now?”

Upon his return to school, Harry had taken his Invisibility cloak, newly returned to him at Christmas, courtesy of Dumbledore and Fawkes, and gone looking for the Mirror of Erised.

During his wanderings, his mind struggled through tortured paths of memories, and questions that he should have asked himself back in July.

What do I do? Do I reveal what I know? Do I keep quiet? A thought raced through his mind, chased by a black grim. What do I do about

Sirius? I could free him now... but that'll change the future, making my knowledge worthless. It was a quandary that was eating away at him. He survived twelve years in Azkaban before. I know he can do it again. But, should he have to? Is that fair to him?

Caught up in his musings, he didn't notice that he had passed the chamber he needed, until he felt the tingle of a ward. He looked up, grinning to himself as he entered the room. There, in front of him, he saw the Mirror.

From this position, he could feel the magic involved, reaching out to his mind, slipping through his Occlumency shields like a hot knife through soft butter.

He braced himself, and looked into the Mirror.

Dumbledore strode down the corridor, his wand flicking slightly in his hand as he cast a Disillusionment charm over himself. He was wondering what Harry was doing wandering the school after curfew, and what had drawn him to that particular room in the whole of the castle.

As he got to the room, he peered in, noticing Harry sat on the floor in front of the mirror, his invisibility cloak wrapped round his shoulders, leaving the image of a head floating two feet from the floor. Tell the truth, it was a rather disconcerting sight.

Albus made his way behind Harry, looking into the mirror himself. As always, he saw the same image; his wife, dead now, and had been for many decades, along with his daughter. Both had been killed during the battle with Grindelwald in 1945, just before Dumbledore had confronted him in Germany. Albus' mirror image was showing him a Christmas morning, unwrapping his present from his daughter, a box full of woolly socks.

Using his Occlumency, he pushed the image away from his mind. He was here to talk to Harry, not reminisce about his long-gone family.

Inwardly, he wondered what Harry saw when he looked into the mirror. Being a mere eleven-years old, he would have bet that it was

something child-like, maybe a present or gift of some kind. Maybe images of his family.

Taking a chance, he gently reached out with his Legilimency, trying to probe the young man's thoughts.

Harry looked into the mirror, feeling his heart swell at the image contained within. He knew it could never happen, but inside, he felt the pang of longing. A feather-light touch on his mental shields brought him sharply back to the present.

Without looking up, Harry broke the silence. "Good evening, Headmaster. Is there something I can help you find?"

Behind him, the disillusionment faded, revealing a slightly sheepish-looking Dumbledore. Harry smoothly stood, allowing the Invisibility cloak to fall to the floor.

"Good evening, Harry." Dumbledore said. "I apologise for my efforts at probing your mind."

Harry tilted his head slightly. "It's rude, Headmaster, but you were not malicious with your attempt. So, I shall let it go this time." His tone hardened. "But, only this time. Do not do it again." The warning was evident in his voice.

Dumbledore nodded. "I am sorry, Harry."

"So, what were you looking for in my head, Headmaster?" Harry asked, mocking Dumbledore's title slightly.

Dumbledore remembered the Sorting Hat's warning, and decided to be completely honest with the young man. "Many people have looked into this mirror, Harry. I was curious as to how you were taking it."

Harry looked back at the mirror, smiling slightly at the image inside. "It's a miracle, Headmaster. It seems to be showing me images that I know can never happen."

“Such is the danger of using the Mirror of Erised, Harry.” Dumbledore said sagely. “Have you realised what the true function of this mirror is?”

Harry pondered for a moment. “Erised... Erised...” He closed his eyes. “E.. r... i... Desire.” He opened his eyes, looking at Dumbledore. “The Mirror of Desire? Is that right, sir?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Can you read the inscription, Harry?”

Harry looked at the top of the mirror, reading the inscription there: Erised stra ehru yto ube cafru oyt on wohsi. “So... if the name of the mirror is backwards, let’s assume this is, as well.”

Dumbledore nodded, proud of the young man’s reasoning ability. “A correct assumption, Harry.”

“‘I show not your... face but your...’ what’s that word? Ah... ‘hearts desire’.” He looked up at Dumbledore. “How does it work, sir? How does this mirror that I’ve never seen before know my heart’s desire?”

“There are many forms of magic in the world, Harry. Some are more powerful than others. The Mirror of Erised is one such magic.” Dumbledore peered down his long nose at Harry. “Do you understand the inherent danger in this device?”

Harry thought for a moment. “Its danger is seduction, I’d imagine, Headmaster. Looking in this mirror, I see something I want desperately... but, I know that it can never happen.”

“Your parents?” Dumbledore asked.

“Among others, sir.” Harry said, blatantly keeping his cards close to his chest. He looked back into the mirror, relishing the images he saw. It was a wedding, obviously his, if the nervous man with green eyes and messy hair was any indication. The bride lifted her veil, handing her corsage to a woman with identical green eyes and red hair, while a man stood behind him, hazel eyes, but the same messy hair. His parents, attending his marriage to a certain witch of his acquaintance.

Behind his father was Remus Lupin, Nymphadora Tonks-Lupin, Sirius Black and Teddy Lupin.

He looked back at Dumbledore. "It's certainly a tempting device, sir." He straightened up slightly, strengthening his resolve. "But, it's not real." He gave a final gaze at the image, locking it into his memory. "It's a dream."

"It does not do to dwell on dreams, Harry," Dumbledore said, wisdom shining through, "and forget to live."

Harry looked up. "I disagree, sir." He stared straight at the Headmaster's eyes, matching fire with twinkle. "Without dreams, we have nothing to strive for in life." He looked pensive. "We would drift along, wherever the tides of time take us."

Dumbledore sat down on the stone floor, gesturing for Harry to join him. Harry sat, keeping his back to the mirror. "While you're here, Harry, do you have time to talk to an old man?"

Harry nodded, almost feeling the image in the mirror shift slightly. He glanced over his shoulder, smiling at the image. A very pregnant Hermione screaming slightly, as a child was born. A young girl, green eyes and messy/bushy hair. Harry shook his head, standing up. "Sir, could we go somewhere else? I don't like the idea of staying in here with that mirror."

Dumbledore chuckled, glad that Harry was wise enough to avoid the temptation. "Of course. Since you're already out after curfew, would you care to talk in my office?"

The two made their way to the Headmaster's office. "By the way, sir," Harry said after a few moments. "I'd like to thank you for sending the cloak to me."

Dumbledore glanced down. "What makes you think the cloak came from me, Harry?"

Harry chuckled. "Sir, who else has access to both my family and a Phoenix? Plus, you signed the note. I'm assuming that my father left the cloak with you before that night in Godric's Hollow?"

"Yes." Dumbledore was both impressed with Harry's abilities, and a bit annoyed that he'd forgotten he'd signed the blasted thing. He suspected he'd only seen the faintest hints of Harry's true intelligence and power. "I was studying the cloak, since it's unlike any other invisibility cloak I've ever seen. That was late Oober of 1981. I never got the chance to return it to your father before he was killed."

"Then, thank you, sir." Harry said politely.

As the two entered Dumbledore's office, Fawkes trilled a welcome, and neatly deposited himself on Harry's lap.

"Hello, Fawkes." Harry said softly.

Dumbledore settled behind his desk, conjuring a tea set, and quickly poured the drinks.

"Harry, I must admit, there have been a number of questions about you recently, both from the staff, and I must admit, I have a number of questions myself."

Harry took the tea from Dumbledore, blowing on it before taking a sip. He made a 'gimme' gesture to Dumbledore, and sat back slightly.

"First of all, Harry..." Dumbledore paused for a moment. How do you ask someone why they're not more stupid? "You seem to know an awful lot for a first year."

"I'm a Ravenclaw, sir." Harry said proudly. "We prize knowledge."

"Harry, you know too much." Dumbledore said gently. "According to Professor McGonagall, during your very first Transfiguration lesson, you assisted Miss Granger, and far exceeded the work she set."

Harry had been prepared for these questions for quite a while. Ever since he had considered taking a joy-ride into the past, he knew this would crop up, and he had gained the necessary material.

“Sir, when I went to Gringotts, I found trunks in one of the Vaults. These contained my parents’ journals. Do you remember my parents’ school records, sir?”

“Ah.” He did remember. While James Potter was not the most studious person he’d met, the young man had been very gifted in Transfiguration. Especially as it related to battle. “Your father?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, sir. In his journals, he detailed how he’d learned Transfiguration. He also wrote down, what he considered, anyway, the ‘Big Secret’. It’s all in the visualisation.”

Dumbledore nodded, taking a fortifying sip of tea.

“Since I know what a matchstick looks like, and I know what a sewing needle looks like, it was relatively easy to make the change between one and the other. Making the needle bigger was again just a matter of knowing what I was turning something from and to, and the rest happened.”

“And what about your Charms work?” Dumbledore asked, conjuring a plate of biscuits. He glanced around, making sure the portraits in the room were asleep, since midnight snacking would go against his reputation.

“That was in my mother’s journal, sir.” Harry said. “Although, she was honest, and called it a diary. According to her diary, she was very good with both Charms and potions.” Harry took a deep breath. “To be frank, sir, I don’t sleep well. So, I have plenty of time to read. During August, when I was living alone in Diagon Alley, I had plenty of time to read and practice.”

Dumbledore nodded again. “That brings me to another point, Harry.” He leaned back, steepling his fingers. “Your emancipation. How did you find out about that? I know it’s not something that is commonly known among the Wizarding community.”

Harry smiled cheekily. "A book, sir. I found several interesting tomes when I was in Flourish and Blotts. One of them talked about 'Old Families'. Since Hagrid said that my parents had left me a large sum of money, I looked up genealogy of my family, and the rules concerning said family. It said that I could assume my Head of House duties at age eleven. So, I went to Gringotts, and got it done."

Dumbledore leaned forward. "And why would you want to leave your relatives' home, Harry? You were safe there."

"Safe from what, Headmaster?" Harry asked politely. "I asked you at Christmas, and the answer you gave was less than... satisfying."

Dumbledore sighed. "Normally, Harry, I would not be having this discussion with a child."

The Sorting Hat cleared its throat noisily from the shelf, before transmitting a message into the Headmaster's mind. You'll find he's nothing like the rest of the children in this school. Dumbledore nodded slightly. "But, in this case, I will make an exception."

"When your family was attacked, Harry, we were left with a number of problems." He took another sip of his tea, and demolished a biscuit. "While it was true that Voldemort had been vanquished, his loyal followers were still at large. If any of them had managed to find you, they would most certainly have attempted to kill you."

Harry nodded, stealing a biscuit from the plate, while Dumbledore chuckled and moved the plate closer.

"As such, it was necessary to hide you from the Death Eaters. Because of the sacrifice of your mother, it provided you with a powerful protection, based on blood. As long as you lived at a place where your mother's blood lives, in this case, your Aunt Petunia and cousin Dudley, Voldemort and his followers would not be able to touch you."

Harry nodded again. "That makes sense, Headmaster." He nodded graciously. "However, what do you know of Aunt Petunia?"

Dumbledore, for a fraction of a second, looked uncomfortable, but masked it quickly. "I had somebody living on Privet Drive, watching over you, Harry. She reported that Petunia did not seem to pay as much attention to you as your cousin. Also, Professor McGonagall watched them on the day that I dropped you off. She was not... enthusiastic... about leaving you there."

Harry snorted. "Sir, Aunt Petunia despised my very existence. For ten years, I was treated as a slave. Hagrid compared me to a House-Elf... whatever that is. I cooked for them, I cleaned for them, I did everything in that house. I was barely given enough food to eat, and was occasionally beaten for asking for more."

Dumbledore looked aghast. "What?" He whispered.

"Sir, do you consider a cupboard, underneath the stairs, to be an appropriate bedroom for a growing child?"

"What?" Dumbledore's whisper was harsher. "What do you mean?"

"When I was growing up, I never had clothing of my own. Everything that I wore was a hand-me-down from my cousin Dudley." Harry shook his head, muttering the next few words. "It didn't help that he's the size of a baby killer whale." He looked back up at Dumbledore, who'd gone white. "All the time, I was told I was a freak, and that I should have the 'freakiness' beaten out of me. At the time, I didn't understand. Now, I realise that they were talking about my being a wizard.

"Frankly, sir, when the opportunity came to get away from the Dursleys, I did. That's why, when you told me as Christmas I had to go back, I refused. They don't want me, I don't want them."

Harry had never seen Dumbledore look so angry, not even when dealing with Crouch Junior at the end of the Tri-Wizard Tournament during the original time-line. "I think, Harry, that you are right."

"Sir, one thing I don't understand. I'm making the assumption that Voldemort's followers have now all been captured?" Dumbledore

nodded. "Then why wasn't I removed from the Dursleys? If you thought that Voldemort's men would be coming after me, wouldn't it make sense to give me the training I needed to defend myself?"

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "At the time, Harry, I had my reasons for keeping you away from the Wizarding world. It wasn't that I wanted you to be unprepared. I simply felt that if you had a normal upbringing, away from the pressure of being the 'Boy-Who-Lived', it would make you a better person."

Harry nodded. It confirmed several things he'd suspected originally. "I assume that this is to prevent me from becoming an arrogant little peacock, strutting around Hogwarts like I own the place?" It's ironic, considering that out of everyone, I pretty much do own Hogwarts. Ah... the irony...

"Frankly, yes." Dumbledore looked haggard. "If you grew up in the spotlight, people constantly praising you for something that you didn't even remember, it would turn you into a glory hound. To be frank, Harry, and please don't take this the wrong way, I rather like the person that you are now."

Harry blushed. "Thank you, sir."

"However, there are still questions I would like answered. You seem to have an innate grasp of magic that is almost impossible to find in an eleven-year old... even one who had been trained from birth would still have issues with the finer points of Charms, or Transfiguration."

Shit... think fast... "Sir, Hermione has almost the same grasp as me. We both have a thirst for knowledge, and quite frankly, have scarily impressive reading speeds."

Dumbledore peered down his nose at Harry, hoping a good long stare would unnerve the young man, making him spill a little more information. It even worked on Severus... but not Harry. Harry gazed back with the same intensity, only looking away when Fawkes trilled from his lap.

“Harry... I suspect that you are not telling me everything.”
Dumbledore said imperiously.

Harry just nodded affably. “That would be an excellent assumption, Headmaster.” He replied casually. “However, if I may be so bold, are you telling me everything?”

Dumbledore suppressed a grin. Oh, at long last, a worthy conversationalist! Both men, for there was now no doubt in Dumbledore’s mind that while Harry may have a limited number of years behind him, he was no child, had a firm grasp on conversational skills. While Harry had revealed details of his home-life, there was nothing there that could be used against him.

“At this point in time, Harry,” Dumbledore said carefully, “I have revealed all I can to you. Obviously, as you grow older, I will be able to share more with you.”

Harry grinned. “The same with myself, sir.”

“May I assume, from our earlier conversation, that you will not be returning to the Dursleys’ house at for the summer?”

“A fine assumption, Headmaster.” Harry said. “The only way I would return to the Dursleys’ is if every other building, tree and cave in the world was destroyed.”

Dumbledore nodded. Not entirely unexpected... “May I have your address for school records, Harry?”

Harry thought for a moment. Dumbledore was a powerful wizard, but even he could not break the Fidelus charm on Harry’s flat. “Yes, sir. Harry Potter lives at 93a, Diagon Alley, London.”

The information appeared in Dumbledore’s mind. There was a flat above that vacant shop in Diagon Alley... Why didn’t he remember that earlier? “Do you have the property under a Fidelus charm, Harry?” Harry nodded. “That’s an awfully advanced piece of magic, Harry. Most adult wizards aren’t able to cast it.” Harry nodded again. “How were you able to cast it?”

Harry smiled inwardly. Time for yet another misdirection. "Sir, with enough money, Goblins make very powerful allies." Entirely true, just not related to my Fidelus charm.

Dumbledore nodded. "Ah." He opened his fob watch. "Good lord, it's almost two in the morning, Harry. You should get some sleep."

Harry nodded, yawned, and stood up. Fawkes sleepily trilled, and flew over to his perch, before settling down for the night. He cocked his head to the Headmaster, and vanished out of the door, leaving Dumbledore to ponder over the conversation. Interesting... he provided answers, but there are still things... off. How does he know Occlumency? Why didn't Arabella report about the abuse he received?

There were still things about Harry Potter that he needed to find out.

Harry made his way back to the Ravenclaw common room, smiling slightly to himself. It had been a battle of wits with Dumbledore. In the past, he would have been soundly defeated by the Headmaster within moments. This time, thanks to his far superior knowledge, he'd managed to hold his own, drawing the competition to a stalemate.

After a brief but silly fight with the portrait, Harry entered the common room. He saw a bushy mass lying on one of the couches, and smiled warmly. Hermione. He crept over, looking down on her sleeping form. When she was asleep, her face was peaceful, and so very cute. He shook himself. Get it together, Potter. While she may look, sound and act like your wife, she's not. Your wife was killed by Voldemort.

Another voice, what he considered his inner-demon, decided to speak up. She's still Hermione, though. She's still the woman that you loved. Not this version. She's already different from what happened. You say 'tom-ayt-to', I say 'to-mar-to'. This is an almost totally different Hermione. She's not a Gryffindor, she's not friends with evil Weasel. That's all irrelevant, Harry. She's still Hermione. At the core...

Harry was startled from his musings by a pair of chocolate eyes staring into his. "Hi." Hermione whispered, a bit unnerved by Harry staring at her for the last two minutes.

"Hi." He whispered back. "What are you doing still up?"

Hermione stretched, reminding Harry of a lioness stretching herself before beginning a hunt. "I was waiting for you to come back. I was hoping to have a chat."

Inside, Harry groaned. It's never good when she say that. "What about?" He asked, settling himself on the floor in front of her.

"To be frank, Harry, I've got some questions for you."

Harry rolled his eyes. No, not again! "Oddly enough, Hermione, I've just had a very similar conversation with Professor Dumbledore."

Hermione sat up, smiling at him. "Oh, good. It's still fresh in your mind, then."

Bollocks. Spot's the jugular, straight in for the kill! Harry nodded. "What would you like to know, Hermione?"

"Basically, Harry, I want to know how you know what you know." Hermione said simply, leaning back on the couch, folding her arms.

"Great." Harry said sarcastically. "That's a bit vague, Hermione. If you're talking about my cooking skills, then the answer would be practice. But, I have the feeling that's not what you're talking about."

Hermione glared at him for a moment, before softening. "You know that's not what I mean, Harry. How are you so good at magic, considering that you're essentially a Muggleborn, like me?"

Aha! Harry thought. "Hermione, how are you so good at magic, considering you're a Muggleborn?"

"W-Well..." Hermione stammered. "I read a lot. I'm several weeks ahead of classes in my textbooks."

Harry nodded, then stood up. "Wait there a minute." He vanished up the stairs, heading for his dorm room, and opening his trunk at the library section. He quickly pulled out a number of dusty tomes, before sealing the trunk and heading back down the stairs. He passed a crimson notebook into Hermione's hand.

"When I went to Gringotts to claim my inheritance, I found a number of my parents' journals. In them, they listed all sorts of things. Their experiences at learning magic, including shortcuts. That's how I seem so advanced in my classes. I've got, in essence, the complete Hogwarts learning experience in my hands." And head, since I've been here already.

Hermione flicked open the journal, reading the first page, before slamming it shut, and handing it back to Harry. "Your mum's diary?"

"Yes." Harry said softly. "My mum's diary lists everything, from her first day at Hogwarts to about a month before she died. When they went into hiding, they put a lot of their possessions into storage, in case they needed to move in a hurry. I've been reading them, and I've gained a lot of insight."

Hermione's gaze softened. "What's it like reading about your parents', Harry?" She whispered.

Harry shrugged. "Well... it's better than nothing, really." He whispered back. "I know I'll never get to meet my mother, so reading this gives me some insight into her." He held up a navy blue book. "The same for my dad. He was, according to McGonagall, very gifted at Transfiguration. That's how I was able to help you during our first lesson."

Hermione nodded. That makes sense... If I'd never known my parents, and someone handed me their journals, I'd be all over them like a rash. "Okay, Harry."

Harry looked at her, smiling slightly. "I'm curious about one thing, Hermione." He waited for her to nod her head slightly. "This must

have been bugging you for weeks. Why are you only asking me about it now?"

Hermione smiled warmly at him. "I thought I'd see if I could work it out on my own. Frankly, Mr. Potter, you're quite the enigma."

Harry mock-bowed. "Thank you, Miss Granger. Coming from the smartest witch of our generation, I consider that quite a compliment."

"As it was intended, kind sir." Hermione said, standing up and curtsying. It would probably have been more impressive if she wasn't wearing her night-gown.

"Anyway, Hermione." Harry said, yawning widely. "It's almost 3am, and I'm bugged. I'm gonna go to bed."

Hermione stood up, and headed for the stairs, before stopping, and looking at Harry. She debated with herself for a moment, then came over and kissed him briefly on the cheek. "Goodnight, Harry." She whispered.

She turned and rushed for the stairs, not stopping to look behind her. Harry chuckled to himself, shaking his head as he climbed the stairs.

Author's Note: This chapter was written in response to several reviews I received, asking why Hermione's not questioning stuff that should be obvious. Hopefully, this answers that. There'll be some serious Padfoot action coming up soon, folks.

Also, a question; as we've established, the younger Weasleys are most definitely not going to be close with Harry. As such, I've been thinking about his circle of friends. So far, the list I've come up with is as follows: Neville Longbottom (After he gets his head out of his arse), Hermione (obviously) Luna (next year) Fem!Blaise Zabini, Susan Bones and Padma Patil. It covers all houses, and has, I think, a good combination of people. I would like to know if people agree/disagree. (Note: It won't be 'The Ministry Six', it'll be 'The Magnificent Seven'!)

– CHAPTER SIXTEEN –

Flashbacks, Potentials, Padfoot and Prisons

The two intense chats he'd had that evening were heavy on Harry's mind as he dropped into bed. The verbal sparring with Dumbledore had left him feeling angsty, and whenever that happened, his mind automatically returned to Sirius.

What the hell do I do? Seemed to be running on automatic through his head. If I get him out, everything will change. People will ask me too many questions about how I know he's innocent. Dad's journal doesn't cover anything about the change in Secret-Keepers, and only Mum, Dad, Sirius and Peter knew about it.

Pettigrew. Just the thought of the bastard running around Hogwarts was enough to make his blood boil. The knowledge that he could get out of bed, head straight up to Gryffindor tower, make his way to Ron's bed, and AK the traitorous little bugger right now did nothing to settle him down.

Would it really be so bad? He asked himself. True, it would change the future completely, rendering my hard-won knowledge useless... But, it would spare a man another two years of being trapped in hell on Earth.

Why wasn't there someone he could talk to about this? If only he could unload, it would make things so much easier. But he knew, really. If anyone found out, and he knew that telling somebody a secret like this would be an invitation for disaster, he'd be hauled into the Department of Mysteries and studied, dosed to the eyeballs with Veritaserum, his knowledge used to change things for 'the greater good'.

No. He couldn't tell anyone.

But, there must be something I can do about Padfoot. Poor bugger's been in there for ten years...

His mind drifted back to a time yet-to-come. Before he'd left the future, he'd run through everything he'd need. His mastery of spells, both non-verbal and wandless. His cover stories, in case people began to notice things they shouldn't. His mapping of the relationship with Hermione, which had been turned to bollocks the instant he'd seen her. But one thing he could never figure out was what to do with Sirius. Oh, he'd had ideas, vague theories, but most of them involved an already-escaped Sirius during Harry's third year.

He ran through the options again. Moony. Nope, no good. Lupin still thought that Sirius was a back-stabbing scumbag who'd sold out the Potters to Voldemort.

Dumbledore. Way too many questions. Dumbledore had been head of the Wizengamot for nearly five decades. He'd had the ability to call a trial ten years ago. Why he hadn't done so was a question Harry was itching to ask when the time was right.

Fudge. Hmm... Out of the frying pan, into the fire. Fudge's political ambitions would run over Harry's good intentions like floodwater. He'd ask too many politically inconvenient questions.

Madam Bones. A stickler for justice, but a woman who loved justice too much. As far as she was concerned, Sirius was a convicted murderer, and wouldn't even look at the files.

What to do? He'd considered writing a letter to Sirius, but he'd dismissed it. Now, he wasn't so sure...

Conveniently ignoring the fact it was three in the morning, Harry dug out a parchment, and hunted on the floor under his bed for a quill.

Dear Padfoot.

You do not know who I am. I regret that I cannot tell you the full story at this time. Know that I am on your side, and will be until death.

As for what I am, know that I am like you. As you can tell by who I addressed this missive to, I know your secret. I know many of your

secrets. I could almost say I keep your secrets. But, I am not a Secret-Keeper. Just like you are not.

There are things happening, Padfoot, that change everything. Help is coming for you. It won't be immediate, and it certainly won't be obvious.

I believe in you, Sirius Orion Black, last scion of the Ancient and Noble House of Black. I know the truth about James and Lily Potter, and I know the truth about what happened on November 1st, 1981. You did not blow up that street, and you are not responsible for the deaths of twelve non-magical people.

They said when you were taken in, that you started laughing, and crying out that it was all your fault that the Potters are dead. I know the truth of that statement. You believe that it was your idea to switch the Secret-Keeper from yourself to Pettigrew. It wasn't. It was under orders from He-Who-Should-Die-A-Horrible-Painful-Death that Pettigrew sow the seeds of doubt.

I know your concerns at the moment are getting enough food to survive. Sirius Black cannot survive in Azkaban. But Padfoot can. Padfoot will be able to keep Sirius' sanity intact.

I know you're concerned about Moony. He lives still. At the moment, life is difficult for him, as it is for anyone with a 'furry little problem'. He is strong, and will cope. As is your godson, Dogfather. He is well, and protected at the moment.

Prongs would want you to stay strong. Your time is coming, Padfoot. When it approaches, you must act swiftly. Perhaps doing crossword puzzles would help pass the time. You never know what you might Prophet from.

Keep the faith, brother.

Stripeclaw.

Harry signed the letter with a flourish. The name 'Stripeclaw' had been given to him by Moony, when he completed his Animagus

transformation. A White Bengalese tiger. Unfortunately, the ability had been stunted due to the regeneration of his body during the time-travel. He wouldn't be able to manifest the ability again until his late fourth or early fifth year, at the earliest.

It was a shame, really. He missed being able to prowl around the castle, scaring the crap out of the skinny red demon that roamed the halls.

Harry rolled the parchment up, using his wand to create a blob of sealing wax, where he imprinted a tiny picture of a stag, a dog, a wolf and a lily flower.

With a soft sigh, Harry opened his mother's diary, flicking to an entry about eight months before he was born. It was when Lily had found out about being pregnant. With that thought in mind, he fell into a fitful sleep.

The morning sun was not kind to Harry, as the rays beat relentlessly on his eyes. He moaned and rolled over, wincing as the sharp corner of the book poked his cheek. With a muted groan, he sat up, rubbing his eyes, and stretching until his back popped.

He staggered out of bed, intent on taking care of his usual morning problem. Two minutes at the toilet and he felt much better. All he needed know was coffee, and shower, and a brief trip to the Owlery to send his missive off.

He only hoped Sirius would appreciate it.

Sirius Black was bored out of his mind. Literally. He knew it was too small to wander by itself, but here in sunny Azkaban, the retirement home for the criminally insane, it didn't really have much choice.

"Mail Call!" One of the Aurors guarding the prison shouted. Sirius didn't even blink. After ten years and two months in Hell... Azkaban, he'd never once received a piece of mail. At first, it hadn't really bothered him, but he'd been longing for human contact that didn't involve being spat on or punched.

The Auror stopped outside Sirius' cell, startling the convict. "Got something for you here, Black." The Auror spat. "Don't know who'd wanna write to a murdering scumbag like you..."

Sirius took the letter, and retreated to the furthest wall of his cell.

As he read it, some of the years of abuse fell away. Knowing that his brother-by-choice and his godson were safe and well was a balm to his wounds.

One line particularly interested him. Sirius Black cannot survive in Azkaban. But Padfoot can. Padfoot will be able to keep Sirius' sanity intact. He'd tried to change into his Animagus form before, but he'd been too weak to maintain it for more than a few minutes. The thought of his innocence had kept his powers, but they were dreadfully weak.

Closing his eyes, thinking of spending a Christmas day dinner with Moony, Prongs, Lily and the Pronglet filled his mind. The instant the image was complete, a fresh surge of power, greater than anything he'd felt in almost a decade, raced through him, and Sirius Black was gone from Azkaban. Only Padfoot remained.

In a castle several hundred miles away, a young man looked up in sudden surprise. He'd felt... something. Something familiar. With startled realisation he grinned. Bide your time, Padfoot. I'll be coming for you soon enough.

January passed slowly for Harry. Malfoy was as prick-ish as ever, while Ron Weasley was still the human equivalent of a visible panty-line; irritating, awkward and unsightly.

The confrontations with Dumbledore and Hermione weighed heavily on his mind. He needed to unload on someone, but who? The same list of people as his dealings with Padfoot sprang to mind, but was easily dismissed.

With a burst of inspiration, Harry quickly left the common room, and headed for the seventh floor, neatly avoiding the Gryffindor common room. When he stopped outside the statue of Barnabas the Barmy, he closed his eyes, walking three times. I need someone to talk to. I need someone to discuss my problems with that won't be found out.

The door appeared, and Harry stepped inside.

His first glance at the room made him snigger. It was set up like a psychiatrist's office, with several large, plush couches, and an antique wooden desk. There was another door, on the far side of the room, that opened as soon as Harry shut the external door.

Five people stepped out. He recognised four immediately. James Potter. Lily Potter. Sirius Black. A 21-year old Hermione Granger, and an elegant woman, appearing to be about 30.

Harry sat on the couch, looking over the new arrivals with interest. "Good afternoon."

"Hello, Harry." James said. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure's mine." Harry replied politely. "I know what you all appear to be... but who are you?"

The stranger smiled at Harry. "Well... I am the anthropomorphic manifestation of Hogwarts."

Harry's eyebrow shot for his hairline. "Really? I didn't know Hogwarts was capable of generating an anthropomorphic manifestation..." He stared closer. "You're sentient, aren't you?" Before the stranger could continue, Harry pressed on. "Of course... the Founders would have placed as much of themselves into the school as they could, plus a thousand years of magic, not to mention all the emotional conduct of the students, would have given you that push."

"Indeed. You may refer to me as 'Arx Accipio', young Heir."

"'Arx Accipio'?" Harry asked. "Why 'Arx Accipio'?"

"Because that is both who and what I am. It is Latin for 'Fortress of Learning'." Arx replied. "You may refer to me as 'Arx'. I am the heart of Hogwarts. What powers me, gives me life, protects us."

Harry just nodded at her, before looking at the carbon copy of his dead wife. "And you?"

Not-Hermione smiled at him. "The Founders, all four, left their essence within the school, call it their 'living magic' when they passed beyond the veil. The HeartStone contains these essences. It's how the Sorting Hat works. We are called up each year to divide the new students."

"Really?" Harry had no idea. "I thought the Sorting Hat did that all by itself."

"No." Not-Hermione replied, smiling at him in the provocative way that drove the Future!Harry wild. "The Sorting Hat is a conduit to the HeartStone. Hogwarts herself determines who goes where."

"Ah." Harry thought for a moment. "That's how the castle knows how many beds to set up in each dorm, isn't it? Because she's already decided who goes where."

"Indeed." Not-Lily spoke up. "You truly are a member of my house, young heir."

"So... you'd be the manifestation of Rowena Ravenclaw, then?" Harry concluded. "Makes sense. Ravenclaw was my great-to-the-power-of-infinity grandmother." Harry turned to Not-James. "You'd be Gryffindor?" Not-James nodded.

Harry turned to Not-Sirius. "My first thought is another Gryffindor... but my second is that you're actually Hufflepuff's essence." Harry smiled. "Sirius was fantastically loyal to me... even at the cost of his own life."

Not-Sirius just nodded, grinning in that slightly manic way that truly represented Sirius Black. Harry turned to the replica of his wife. "So... you'd be Slytherin then. Certainly makes sense. Hermione was always tremendously ambitious."

Not-Hermione nodded. "You placed her in Ravenclaw in this time-stream. Why?"

Harry leaned back on the couch, resting his head against the back, and allowed his eyes to drift closed. "Hermione... my Hermione, was a brilliant witch, who was ridiculed from her very first day at Hogwarts. Not only by her foes, but her friends. I know that the Hermione downstairs is not my Hermione, but I truly believe she will be a better witch because of it."

Not-Hermione nodded. "I agree, young Heir. She will be supported, and will truly excel in her new home. With you by her side, she could become one of the greatest witches ever."

Harry opened his eyes. "I hate to ask this of you, but could you change your forms... It's bringing back some painful memories."

The four looked at him imperiously for a moment, before seeming to melt in front of his eyes. When they had reformed, they wore the guise of the Founders. Slytherin still looked shifty, and slightly satanic, with a trimmed pointy goatee.

"A pleasure to meet you all." Harry said, nodding his head respectfully to each of them.

"You brought us into being to talk, young Heir." Slytherin said, his voice warm and caring. It was a far cry from the stereotype that reigned in the world at the moment.

"I did." Harry said, practically jumping to his feet, and beginning to pace. "I... I find myself unsure of where to go from here."

Helga smiled warmly. "Tell us your problem."

Harry stopped for a moment, before pacing again, faster than before. "Before I left my original time, I was so sure of the things I had laid out. The project that I was working with had devised a new method of time-travel. Not like a time-turner, where you can only travel back a day." He stopped, and turned around, before beginning to pace again. "This technology was completely unconnected from magic."

“Muggles have time travel machinery?” Rowena asked. “I didn’t think that was possible.”

Harry snorted. “Non-magical humans have a massive amount of technology. When I left the future, it was the end of the 21st century. Humans had mastered space-travel to the nearby planets, updating their astronomical knowledge of the galaxy immeasurably. They’d created a way of conjuring food, so that there was virtually no hunger in the world. And there was the project. Time-travel to any point in your own life-time.”

“Incredible...” Salazar commented. “Simply incredible!”

“However, there was a danger in the project. By stepping outside the confines of the machine, you would step into the past.” Harry slumped back into the chair. “The downside, though...”

“You killed someone.” Helga said. “Another version of yourself.”

Harry nodded. “Yes. Stepping into the world caused the technology to assimilate the DNA of the original, and use it to regenerate the new arrival. My 112 year-old body was returned to its pre-pubescent state.”

“This has upset you?” Godric asked, leaning forward in his chair.

“No.” Harry said absently. “And that’s only one of the things that worries me. Should I feel guilty for killing someone?”

Rowena, sweet, gentle Rowena, took the plunge. “But, did you kill him? If you killed Harry Potter, how are we talking to you? You are Harry Potter, as much as the other. You removed him from the time-stream.”

“It’s not that easy.” Harry said. “I... I meddled with fate. Tinkered with destiny. Decided to destroy 101 years of the space-time continuum because I didn’t like what had happened. Doesn’t that make me as bad as Voldemort?”

"You will save lives, heir." Salazar said firmly. "You will improve history."

"How do we know?" Harry persisted. "How can anyone know the future? How do we know I won't cock it up anymore?" He ran his fingers through his hair, before letting out a groan of frustration. "What have I done?"

The four Founders looked at each other, when Arx spoke up. "You have brought hope, Heir. Not just for yourself. Your work with your wife has made her believe in herself, far earlier than in your original time. She will become a potent force. The members of the Snake house believe that they will not be hated because of the actions of one man. The whole of the Wizarding world believes that a true saviour, a giant among men, walks among them. This time, however, that reputation is deserved."

"But... where do I go from here?" Harry whined, truly sounding like an eleven-year old. "I want to get Sirius out of prison, but that'll bollocks up the time-line. It'll prompt Wormtail to escape earlier, which could lead Voldemort to resurrect himself before I'm ready." He slumped back into the couch, before lying down. "I want someone to understand..."

Godric stood, and kneeled in front of the couch. "We understand what you have told us." He said kindly. "What you want is guidance."

Harry nodded vigorously. "Just for once, I want to be taken care of. I want someone to tell me what to do, not for their sake, but for mine." He looked at Godric with puppy-dog eyes. "What can I do?"

"Prepare yourself, young heir." Salazar said, standing just behind Godric. "Think about what is to come, make a list, and then get what you need."

He reminds me of Moody. Constant Vigilance! Harry thought. "Okay..." He looked pensive for a moment. "Well... Voldemort's gonna go after the stone in about six months. I'll need to stop him. At the moment, Voldemort's so weak, I can take him on without any problems."

Godric just nodded. "Over-confidence can be a weakness, Harry." He held up a hand to forestall any protests. "But, being afraid will not serve you."

"Well... after that, I'll need a way to get to school for the beginning of my next year. A house-elf will block my access to the platform at the train station." Harry looked at the others.

"A Portkey, young heir." Helga said from the other couch. "You know how to make them."

Harry scrunched up his face in disgust. "I'd rather not. Portkeys make me sick to my stomach."

"Then find another way to use them." Rowena said. "Find a way to contain the sensation or block it out, so that they do not make you sick to your stomach."

Harry nodded, his keen mind already beginning to contemplate what he could do. "I also need a way to protect others. There were so many casualties..."

"The three death curses are still in use, I assume?" Arx asked, suddenly.

"Death curses?" Harry asked, confused. "There's only one Killing curse."

"No... the Death Curses are... well... they're the work of evil, Harry." Rowena said. "A curse for mind control, a curse to torture, and a curse to kill. In our time, using one of them was an automatic death sentence."

"Ah. We call them the 'Unforgivables' now." Harry said. "Using one on another human being gets you a one-way ticket to prison."

Arx spoke up again. "There must be a way to stop these vile creations." She smiled at him. "As an Heir of Ravenclaw, I'm sure you're up to the task."

Great... find a way to block the unblockable. Arx, baby, you don't ask for much. "You want mayo on that?" Harry asked cheekily. He sobered up. "There's a basilisk under the school."

Salazar froze. "Blink is still here?" He asked, sounding both shocked and afraid.

Harry snorted, before starting to laugh. "You called a sixty-three foot basilisk 'Blink'?" He let loose a fully belly laugh, which lasted far too long, in Arx's opinion. Harry took his time to bring himself under control, before taking a single glance at Salazar, and bursting out laughing again.

After Harry had calmed himself, which had taken a lot of effort, he started again. "Yes. 'Blink' is still here. She'll go around petrifying students. The positive is that the final battle with..." Harry snorted, trying not to start laughing again, "'Blink' is that a charmed diary will be destroyed. The downside is that it'll create another sort of monster."

"What sort?" Godric demanded.

"A potion-obsessed fan girl." Harry shuddered. "She interfered with my heart. I don't particularly want to deal with her, and saving her life will certainly do that."

"You will need to pick the lesser of two evils, Harry." Salazar said. "A fan-girl can be contained. Blink could cut a swath across the whole Wizarding world."

"Fine." Harry pouted.

The talk with the Founders had broken up shortly after that, with an invitation that Harry could return. While he'd not managed to make a decision regarding Sirius, he'd managed to get some things off his chest, and onto the chests of others.

While trudging back, Harry saw Neville Longbottom sulking down the corridor. Shit... He thought. I'm so not in the mood for a fight at the moment.

“Potter.” Neville said as he saw the other boy approach.

“Longbottom.” Harry replied in a neutral tone. “Something I can do for you?”

Neville shook his head, then stopped. “Actually, there is. I want to give you something.”

Harry’s hand subtly went for his wand. “Oh?”

Longbottom held out his hand. “I want to give you my apologies. I’ve been behaving like an arse for the last few months.”

Harry reached for Neville’s hand automatically, before he froze in place. “What?”

“I’ve been acting like a prat.” Neville said cheerfully. “I realise that now. I’ve been treating you like dirt since you got here, and I want to say ‘I’m sorry’.”

“Why?”

“Ron.” Neville mumbled. “He said it was a chance to shine if we were to try to become your friends, so that we could share your fame.”

“Ron’s a dick.” Harry said bluntly. “So... you’re trying to become my friend... That doesn’t make any sense. Ron’s practically been stalking me since I got here. Creepy little git.”

“I’m not asking to become your friend, Mr. Potter.” Neville said. “With the way I’ve been acting, I certainly wouldn’t want to. But, I do want to apologise to you.”

This is so not the Neville I remember. “You’ve confused me, Longbottom, a situation I don’t particularly like.”

“That was not my intention.” Neville said, letting his hand drop to his side. “But, my apologies are there, none-the-less.”

Harry just stared at him for a moment, causing him to squirm, before Harry turned away. "I'll consider it, Longbottom."

"He what?" Hermione asked loudly.

"He said he wanted to apologise." Harry replied. The common room had stopped at Hermione's outburst, and were getting back to whatever they were doing before.

"Why? He's been a prat for months."

"I know this." Harry said, leaning back on the loveseat. "It's odd. My first thought is to tell him to sod off, but thinking about it, I think he was just lonely."

"Lonely?" Hermione leaned back, grasping Harry's hand automatically. "We were both lonely when we got here, and we didn't start acting like idiots."

"No." Harry agreed. "But, then again, both of us are quite... mature. Independent, even. You're very responsible, and I'm... what was it your dad called me? Oh, yeah... 'a forty-year old child'. Both of us know better. Tell you the truth, I think Longbottom's had a very shielded lifestyle. He just didn't know better."

Hermione just stared at him for a moment. "What did you tell him?"

"Just that I'd consider it." Harry replied, squeezing her hand gently. "You never know... he could turn out to be a great friend."

"Or a giant penis." Hermione hissed back. "I've not forgotten all those fights that those three have tried to start."

"That's Weasley." Harry said dismissively. "That boy's so stupid, it frightens me."

"I think it's his sister you should be worried about." Hermione said, starting to chuckle. "You remember what Fred and George said."

"Thanks for that!" Harry said with mock-cheerfulness. "There's an image I need to Scourgify."

Author's Note: I know this chapter may seem a little odd, but it provides some back story to the prologue, and also begins to introduce the idea of Neville as a friend. It also introduces the concept for the Portkey box, which I simply cannot get out of my mind.

Coming Soon: Chapter Seventeen: "Hagrid, Boogie and Quidditch"

– CHAPTER SEVENTEEN –

Hagrid, Boogie and Quidditch

Harry awoke the following day with a startled realisation; he'd been at Hogwarts for almost five months, and had only been to see Hagrid twice. He'd need to spend some time there, so he could pump Hagrid for information regarding the Philosopher's Stone, and about the Gringotts break-in. And Fluffy. And Flamel. Man, the guy's like a fount of information we shouldn't know

He leapt out of bed, racing into the shower block with a determined glint in his eye, before he realised that it was Saturday, and he had plenty of time. He slowed down marginally, washing his hair, fighting a losing battle at getting the damned mop under any semblance of control, before getting dressed.

As was their custom, Hermione was waiting in the common room for him, so they could go to breakfast together.

I don't know how I'll cope during the summer Harry thought idly to himself. Much as he was a night-owl, he loved spending this time in the morning with Hermione. Seeing her go from sleepy cuteness to alert beauty warmed his heart. It also caused him painful reminders of the time in the future, when the two would share breakfast at their home, usually after a night of wild sex, and that warmed his... well, a little lower down than his heart.

He shook his head, trying to firmly ground himself in the present. The two left the common room, holding hands as usual.

"Hermione?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Do you fancy going seeing Hagrid after breakfast?"

"He's not gonna try and feed us rock cakes again, is he?" Hermione asked. "You know how I feel about those, Harry. I like my teeth intact, you know."

Harry just grinned at her. "True... and I don't fancy explaining to your dentist parents how you managed to destroy your mouth with a cake."

Hermione just smiled back, displaying her bright white teeth. Breakfast passed smoothly, and Harry found himself on the nearly frozen path to Hagrid's hut. With Harry's customary knock on the door, along with a 'back, Fang!', Harry was let into the hut.

"Hello, Harry." Hagrid said, wiping his hands on a small rag. About the size of a bedsheet. King size bedsheet. "I've not seen you for a while."

Harry hung his head with shame. "I know, Hagrid. I'm sorry. Things have just been so... so different. It took me a while to get used to it. I know that's not an excuse, though. Can you forgive me?"

Hagrid just smiled, pulling a large teapot from the shelf. "Course I can! Now, be sitting yourself down, you too, Hermione, and I'll put the tea on. Would you like a cake?"

With identical, panicked headshakes, Harry and Hermione declined. "No, thanks. Just came from the Great Hall."

"Yeah!" Hermione added quickly. "Ate so much for breakfast... just about ready to pop."

Hagrid just shook his head, turning back to the fireplace. Harry leaned closer to Hermione. "You know... I think he actually uses rocks for his cakes." He whispered, watching Hermione try to stifle her giggles. "If we ever have to lay siege on Hogwarts, I think they'll be enough ammunition in here to get through the doors."

Hagrid was soon serving them their tea. "So, Hagrid, what's new with you?"

"Not a lot, Harry." Hagrid replied, biting into a rock cake. There was a strong 'crack', which Harry wasn't sure was the cake or Hagrid's tooth. "Had a few injured unicorns in the forest lately, but apart from that, my job's pretty much the same day-to-day."

“Didn’t think anything could catch a unicorn.” Hermione said quietly.

“Most things, can’t.” Hagrid replied simply. “They move too fast except for the most powerful dark magic.”

Harry just ‘hmm’d’. “Hagrid, do you know anything about why we can’t go to that corridor on the third floor?” He asked.

“Well, ‘cause of Fluffy, of course.” Hagrid said.

“Fluffy?” Harry and Hermione said in unison. “What’s a ‘Fluffy’?” Hermione asked.

“Uh... I shouldn’t have said that.” Hagrid stammered.

Harry suddenly sat up. “That reminds me, Hagrid. Do you remember when we went to Diagon Alley?” Hagrid nodded nervously. “You got something from vault 713. That same day, there was a break-in. Do you think they’re connected?”

Hagrid started sweating. “Uh... I wouldn’t know about that, Harry.” He said. “Uh... that was a mission from Professor Dumbledore. Top secret.”

Hermione noticed Hagrid’s nervousness. “Hagrid, you know more than you’re telling.”

“N-No...” Hagrid shook his head, taking a quick drink from his tea. “It’s nothing to do with me.” He said firmly, after taking a moment to fortify himself. “It’s to do with Professor Dumbledore, and Nicholas Flamel.” He clamped his hand over his mouth.

Thank you, Hagrid. Harry thought victoriously. It’s nice to know that you’re as effortlessly predictable as ever. He really couldn’t fault Hagrid, though. He was one of the most open people Harry had ever met. An innocent child in a giant’s body.

“I shouldn’t have said that. Should not have said that.” Became Hagrid’s mantra as the two youths left the hut.

"I love Hagrid to bits," Harry said as they snuck away, "but the poor fella can't keep a secret to save his life." He smiled. "I wonder if, when we get to 6th year, we can get him involved in those Friday night study sessions that Vector thinks nobody knows about. What does she call them? 'Advanced Studies in Probability Matrices'."

"What?"

"Poker. Let's face it, Hagrid'd be bankrupt before your chair's warmed up."

Hermione just snickered for a moment, before she sobered up. "I've heard that name before." She said, her eyes glazing over as she started to search through her memory.

"So have I." Harry said, recognising the signs of Hermione's search. "I'll save you the time." Hermione's eyes became sharper. "He's on the back of Dumbledore's chocolate frog card. He's an alchemist. He and Professor Dumbledore found the twelve uses of Dragon's Blood in the early part of the century."

Hermione clicked her fingers. "That's it! I knew I've read about him. He's the only person in the last twelve centuries to make the Philosopher's Stone."

Harry stopped in his tracks. "Do you think that's what's being hidden on the third floor?"

"It must be." Hermione said, taking his hand, and pulling him forward, shouting her unknown battle cry. "Quickly, Harry, to the library!"

"Five hours, Hermione!" Harry moaned. "You can be so cruel, sometimes!"

"Honestly, Harry!" Hermione lectured. "Five hours in the library is not cruel."

"On a Saturday." Harry hissed. The two had returned to the common room after Harry's moaning got the better of her. "You don't think it's evil dragging me to the library for five hours on a Saturday?"

Hermione just shrugged. "Not really."

"You scare me, sometimes." Harry said, parroting Ron from the original time-line. "You're brilliant, don't get me wrong, but scary."

Hermione preened under being called 'brilliant', but ignored the 'scary' part. "Thank you, Harry. I only wish we could have found out more about him."

Harry thought for a moment. "Since I strongly suspect you half have the library tucked into your dorm room, why don't you check to see if you have any books in there."

Without bothering to respond, Hermione dashed for the stairs. Man, she's got ground speed. Harry trotted up to his dorm room, grabbing his Wizarding wireless and *The Spy Who Loved Me* from his trunk, and made his way back downstairs. He tuned the wireless to a Muggle station, and sat reading his book.

Hedwig made her way into the common room through an open window. Harry raised his arm without looking, letting her settle, before she jumped up to his shoulder. She looked down at the book, appearing to intently read when Hermione made her way downstairs.

It was such a cute moment, seeing the two reading on the couch. Hermione just stopped and stared for a moment, before she came over. She plopped on the couch next to Harry, before reaching up to scratch Hedwig, who looked at her for a second, hooted at her, and went back to his reading.

A new song came onto the radio, causing Harry's head to start bobbing in time to the music. To Hermione's endless amusement, Hedwig started bobbing in sync with Harry, still reading over his shoulder.

"To the left..." Harry's head bobbed to the left, Hedwig's still in perfect sync, both still reading. "To the right..." Both did a double bob to the right, still reading the book.

I would kill for a camcorder right now. Hermione thought, totally abandoning any thoughts of Nicholas Flamel or the Philosopher's Stone.

Harry closed his book, looking at his bobbing owl, before she jumped off his shoulder, and landed on the coffee table. Harry stood up, stretching, before looking over at Hedwig, who nodded eagerly.

"To the left... to the right... take it back, now, y'all." Harry did the motions, sliding across the floor, while Hedwig mirrored him on the coffee table. Hermione burst into a fit of giggles, watching boy and owl dance in perfect unison.

"One hop this time!" Hedwig hopped forward on the table, while Harry jumped forward. Throughout the song, the two copied each other's actions, dancing the whole way through, amber eyes locked on emerald.

Hermione was entranced. How does an owl learn to cha cha?

The song, lasting just over four minutes, had managed to gather quite a number of Ravenclaw students. Hedwig looked up, seeing the watchers, and hooted loudly, bringing Harry's attention firmly back to the present.

Bugger. He looked around, before blushing, and slumping back into his chair, picking up his book, and not looking up. Hermione threw herself onto the couch next to him, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"Well, I thought you looked adorable." She said softly, grasping his free hand. "You and Hedwig were very pretty."

Pretty? Boys don't do pretty. We do butch, and manly. Ruggedly handsome, if we've got faces like granite, but pretty? No! Harry thought, amused with Hermione's description. "It's a shame you didn't get up and dance with me." The momentary panic on Hermione's face made Harry chuckle. "You'd have done good up there."

She just shook her head, shuddering lightly at the thought.

January 25th. Saturday. 11 o'clock. Harry's first Quidditch match. Ravenclaw vs. Gryffindor.

It wasn't really fair. Harry'd been a member of that team for six years, and knew the plays the team used. Plus, Wood's maniacal enthusiasm for the game made his predictable, if you knew his moves. And Harry did.

Lee Jordan introduced the teams. "Welcome to the third game of the season! The Birds vs. the Lions! Introducing first... Gryffindor! Captain and Keeper Oliver Wood, Chasers Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet and Angelina Johnson, Beaters Fred and George Weasley, and Seeker Cormac McLaggen!"

The seven crimson-clad Gryffindors sailed onto the pitch, moving smoothly. Harry almost burst out laughing when he heard that Cormac was playing Seeker. The arrogant braggart knew next to nothing about Quidditch. What he did know was how to be pompous and annoying.

"And now, Ravenclaw! Captain and Chaser, Roger Davies, Chasers, Cho Chang and Bradley Erickson, Keeper Sarah Fawcett, Beaters Eddie Carmichael and Robert Lucas, and Seeker Harry Potter!" The Ravenclaws flew out in formation, each determined to do their best, Cho relieved that she didn't have to be the Seeker, a position she would've been forced to play, if Harry wasn't available.

The teams got into position above the centre of the pitch, with the hawk-eyed Madam Hooch stood on the ground, one foot on the case containing the Quidditch balls.

Harry hovered just above and to the front of Fred and George. "Hey, fellas." He said casually.

The twins looked up, identical grins on their faces. "ickle Harrikins." They said in unison.

"So, you're going for the Plostoy gambit, aren't ya?" Harry asked, watching their faces drop. "Yeah, wouldn't do that one if I were you."

“How do-” Fred started.

“you know?” George finished.

Harry just winked. The snitch appeared in front of him, before vanishing. Hooch’s whistle blew. Harry shot forward, watching McLaggen start to chase him.

Time for a little fun! He thought, racing towards the Gryffindor goal posts. McLaggen followed recklessly, not really paying attention, just pouring on speed, trying to pace Harry, who raced round the goal post, before accelerating to his Nimbus’ top speed, bypassing the other seeker easily. He rocketed down the pitch, drawing level with Katie Bell, who was clutching the Quaffle to her chest.

“Hey, Katie.” Harry said, flying parallel to her. She tried to shake him off, but Harry’s abilities with a broom were unsurpassed. “You’re looking very pretty today. Is that a new lipstick?”

Davies, at that moment, knocked the Quaffle from Katie’s hands, straight into the waiting arms of Erickson, who shot towards the Gryffindor goals. Katie looked murderously at Harry, who simply winked, blew her a kiss and pulled away.

Harry raced towards McLaggen, playing a little game of chicken while he waited for the snitch to appear. He knew from experience that it wouldn’t show up for at least ten minutes, giving him a chance to taunt the Gryffindors. McLaggen saw him coming and ‘eeped’, before racing away. Harry chased after him, watching Ravenclaw take two shots on goal, only to have them knocked away by Oliver Wood.

Hmm... he’s too good. Let’s see if we can shake him up a little. Harry soared towards the goal posts, pulling his broom to a halt just behind the centre goal.

“Hey, Ollie.” Harry called. “You’re looking very good today. In fact, watching you sit there, I’ve never wanted to be a broom so much in my life. D’you wanna go get a drink after the game?”

Oliver turned round, just as Cho sent the Quaffle through the left hoop, scoring the first goal of the game. Wood stared at the goal hoop, before turning back to glare at Harry, but he'd already flown off, flying in between the Weasley twins.

"Wotcher, chaps." He said, flying perfectly in between them, even as they batted Bludgers at the Ravenclaw chasers. "If there's a party after the match, d'you boys fancy coming up to the tower to celebrate the Ravenclaw win? You know we'd be happy to have you there."

"Harry, are you trying to distract us?" George asked.

"Well... yes." Harry replied, a sloth grip roll allowing him to roll underneath the path of a Bludger, before it smacked into George's broom, knocking the other boy off the broom. Harry's seeker reflexes reacted on instinct, grabbing George out of the air, and holding him steady until he could recover the broom.

"And Potter saves Weasley from a nasty spill!" Jordan's voice called out. "Not against the rules, but not something you see everyday!"

George looked at Harry oddly, before he suddenly pulled away, leaving Harry to concentrate on finding the Snitch.

"And Alicia Spinnet scores for Gryffindor! That's ten-all! No sign of the snitch yet, but both seekers are hunting for it now!"

Harry's raspberry blowing while flying upside down forced George Weasley to miss hit a Bludger, watching the heavy iron ball smash Angelina Johnson firmly in the calf, the wet smack of bruised flesh echoing around the pitch, while Cho shot forward on her Cleansweep 8, scooping up the dropped Quaffle and scoring a magnificent solo goal.

At that point, Harry's main worry about the game came true. His broomstick started bucking like a wild horse. Bollocks! Quirrell, you rotten bastard, couldn't you have let me have one game in peace? Harry hung on as his broom tried to throw him off, when he suddenly let go.

Hermione was watching in the stands, Hagrid stood behind her, seeing Harry on the broom.

“That’s not right.” Hagrid proclaimed loudly. “Something’s interfering with Harry’s broom.” The two watched Harry let go of the broom, being thrown forward a good six feet, before gravity asserted its hold. “Ha! The stupid bird can’t even stay on his broom!” Ron Weasley was laughing, Seamus laughing sycophantically along, while Neville looked at the redhead with a look of pity and disgust. Checking left and right, he stamped down hard on Ron’s foot, relishing the feel of snapping metatarsal, while looking innocently at the chasers for both teams battling throughout the sky.

Harry thrust one hand towards the ground, stopping his momentum completely. The second hand went towards his broom, trying to summon the broom forward.

A second attack, this one a brutal Legilimency assault, crackled around his mental shields. With using so much of his power holding himself a hundred feet in the air, Harry felt far more pain than normal.

Get out! Get out! GET OUT! He mind-screamed, turning his head towards the teacher’s box, where he saw Quirrell staring at him. You want in my mind? How’s this! With that, Harry sent his memory of being hit by Voldemort’s killing curse ten years ago. It wouldn’t kill Quirrell, but it would... There it was! Quirrell fell backwards off his seat, knocking his head on the bench behind.

Harry reached forward for his broom, Accio running through his mind. However, fate was obviously still pissed with him, as a Bludger hit him square in the small of his back, pushing him forward to collide with the broom. With an explosive ‘pah’, the breath was knocked from his lungs, and for a moment, all he could do was hang onto his broomstick.

With a monumental effort, Harry forced his head up, gasping for breath. When he stopped seeing spots, he slowly, painfully, hauled himself back onto his broom, before flying gently forward. Marvellous! Harry thought viciously. I get the crap knocked out of me, and now I see the bloody snitch! With an agonised grunt, Harry reached forward, grasping the snitch.

"And Harry Potter's caught the snitch!" Lee's voice sounded. "Ravenclaw wins, 200 to 60!" He tried, really, to keep the disappointment out of his voice as he announced his own house losing.

Harry let the broom drop down gently, where he saw Hermione waiting, her face pale, with tiny crescent shapes embedded in the flesh along her jawline. She's been gripping her face again. Harry thought idly, as he started to grow very cold. Oh, crap... I'm going into shock! He landed next to Hermione, who grabbed him in a hug.

"Oh, Harry, I was so worried!" She said, looking into his eyes. "Are you okay?"

Harry shook his head, before tottering forward a few steps, colliding with Hagrid. "Hagrid?" He asked, his voice distant.

"Harry?" The giant replied, looking concerned.

"Catch me." Harry slumped forward, to be scooped up by the half-giant. That was the last he knew.

Another Author's Note: A couple of chapters ago, I asked people to comment on the "Magnificent Seven". The responses I've got have been generally favourable, apart from the fem!Blaise. Then, I realised something. Blaise is a lad in canon. We all know that. However, there are more fem!Blaise stories out there than there are male!Blaise. So, he'll be a bloke. That way, the male/female ratio will be 4/3 instead of 5/2.

Also, I've been asked about other ships. So far, to be frank, I haven't decided. I'll probably end up putting Won-Won with Lavender, 'cause I think they deserve each other (Filthy self-serving gits). I've been asked to make sure it's not Remus/Tonks. Don't have a problem with that. I'm sure we can find someone buff and manly for our favourite metamorph. (Maybe Kingsley... hey, that'd work actually... Huge, strapping Auror, with muscles like a draught horse, and little Tonks...)

Sorry, one more thing: I received a PM asking if I was gonna write an NC-17 version of this. Since I'm English, I don't actually know what that is. I'm presuming it means graphic sex/violence (when they get to

that point). Sadly, the answer is no, for two reasons; One, FFnet won't allow it, and Two... I actually can't write smut to save my life. It comes out like a Haines manual, dry, full of fact, and very dull.

– CHAPTER EIGHTEEN –

Honks and Heirs

It took two days for Harry to convince the evil queen of medicine to let him out of the Hospital Wing. As usual, she'd fussed over him enough to fill his year's quota of 'mothering', and his taste-buds were currently on strike, in protest to all the vile concoctions he'd been forced to swallow. Shortly after getting his release orders, he'd dressed and run out of the hospital wing leaving a small cloud of dust floating after himself.

He belted down the corridor, fleeing for his life. He pulled to a stop when he sensed someone ahead of him. He crept up, and peered round the wall, hearing the soft fwump of a body hitting the ground.

"Bugger!" A soft feminine voice said softly. Stifling a giggle, Harry stepped out into the corridor, and extended a hand.

"Can I help you, Miss?" He asked, his voice wavering slightly with the force of laughter.

The girl looked up, to see the famous Harry Potter stood over her. Her face erupted into a fierce blush that crept up to her hairline. She reached out and took the hand, levering herself to her feet. "Thanks." When she was back on her feet, she looked down, embarrassed.

Harry picked up on this. "Don't worry about tripping, Miss." He said, looking at the ground. "It's a tricky piece of floor, that. Deceptively... flat, and unimpeded."

The girl looked at him, a fierce glare. "Thanks." She spat.

"I'm Harry." Harry said, holding out his hand again. "Harry Potter."

"Oh, please." The girl said. "Like there's someone in this school who doesn't know who you are." She pumped his hand once. "I'm Tonks."

Harry bit back a small gasp of shock. He knew Tonks was a seventh-year while he was a firstie, but he'd never have guessed that this girl

was Tonks. He looked her up and down. She was short, standing about five feet and two inches, an inch shorter than himself, with soft blue eyes and buttery blonde hair. She was clad in the standard robes of a Hufflepuff student, but he had to admit; they looked a damned sight better on her than they did on anyone else. She looked adorable.

“Tonks...” Harry looked puzzled for a moment. “Wait a minute... are you that girl who hates her name? ‘She-Who-Will-Not-Be-Named’?”

Tonks barked out a short laugh. “Is that what they’re calling me now?”

Harry nodded enthusiastically. “Yes. A group of fifth-years said that you’ll hex anyone who calls you...” Harry stopped just before saying her name. Tonks’ hand inched a little closer to her wand. “By your first name.”

Tonks nodded once, allowing her hand to drop back to her side. “You’ve got that right, kid.”

“Hey! Don’t call me ‘kid’!” Harry retorted. “Nymphadora.”

Tonks pulled her wand, and launched a tickling hex at Harry, who quickly dodged to the side. She snarled gently at him, before placing her wand back in her robes. “Don’t call me Nymphadora!” She snapped, her hair changing colour to a blood red, a sort of biological red-alert sign.

Harry just held up his hands. “Okay... sorry.” He glanced back at the floor. “So, why’d you trip?”

She blushed again, and mumbled something.

“What?” Harry asked, placing his hand behind his ear and cupping. “Didn’t quite catch that.”

“I said,” Tonks enunciated, “that I’m a bit clumsy.”

“Oh.” Harry asked, peering intently at her. “Is it true what they say about you?”

Tonks blushed, and hung her head in shame, thinking back to all the rumours that had been floating around about her Metamorphic abilities and the possibilities for sexual fantasies. "What is it they say about me?" She asked glumly.

Harry grinned. "They say you have the ability to fall over a stray particle of thin air." She looked up at him, glaring for a moment, before she relented and nodded. Harry just stared at her for a moment, before letting out a slight growl, and pulling his wand. "Wait a minute! What are you?" He snapped suddenly. "You are not what you appear to be! What are you?"

Tonks took a step back, stumbled over a dust-mite, and fell onto her arse. With a squeak, she tried to pull herself to her feet. The tip of Harry's wand, glowing red with a stunning charm, stopped her.

"W-What do you mean?" Tonks stammered.

Harry's voice had turned as cold as ice. "You... you have active magic running through you. It appears to be some kind of glamour, but more complex. This is not your real appearance." Harry said. "What are you? A Death Eater? Are you here for the stone? Hoping to return your master back to power?"

"What?" Tonks just stared at him.

"What is your mission?" Harry roared. Tonks' jaw flapped a couple of times. "Answer me!"

"What is going on here?" A new voice called out. Harry turned his head slightly, seeing Professor McGonagall approaching quickly, with Hermione at her side. Harry held up his hand, forming a shield between the approaching ladies and the fallen Tonks.

"I'll be happy to explain in a moment, Professor." Harry said, not taking his attention away from Tonks. "You never answered the question, 'Tonks'."

Tonks scrunched up her face, releasing her Metamorphic energy. Her body change, growing several inches taller, her face changing to a cute heart shape, and her hair lengthening and turning black.

“Bellatrix...” Harry snarled, repositioning his wand.

“No.” McGonagall commanded firmly. “Mr. Potter, stop this at once! That is Nymphadora Tonks.”

Harry turned his head slightly. “Then why was she disguised, ma’am?” Harry said brusquely.

“Er...” Tonks cleared her throat nervously. “I’m a Metamorph. I have the ability to change my physical form.”

“Then why disguise yourself?” Harry snapped.

Tonks blushed, her face and hair turning red. “Well... as you said... I look a lot like Bellatrix Lestrange. She’s my Aunt. So, I change what I look like, so people don’t know that little bit of gossip.”

Harry lowered his wand. “Ah.” He looked down at the ground, face heating up with a blush and sheepish expression. “Sorry, Miss Tonks.”

The shield stopping McGonagall and Hermione dropped. Hermione dashed forward, wrapping Harry in a firm Hermi-hug. “Harry, are you okay? You’ve been in the Hospital Wing for two days.”

I deserve an Oscar for that acting. Harry thought idly, while hugging Hermione. I already knew she looked like the Bella-bitch, but, damn! And what better way to introduce myself to Tonks than threatening to kill her? Academy awards, here we come...

“I’m fine, thanks, Hermione.” Harry said softly. He pulled away from Hermione, and extended a hand to Tonks. “I really am sorry about that.” He hauled the blushing metamorph to her feet. She changed her form, back to the short blonde.

"I'm curious, Mr. Potter," McGonagall spoke up, "how you knew that young Miss Tonks was not what she appeared to be."

Crap... never thought of that. I knew I wanted to meet her, get properly introduced, but I didn't want to do it in front of a teacher. "Uh... I don't know, Professor. I just... I just knew that something wasn't right."

"So you felt the need to denigrate her in public?" McGonagall snapped.

Harry shrugged. "I didn't know what she was, Professor. For all I knew, she could have been a Death Eater in disguise. I thought it best to show a little vigilance."

"Oh, lord..." McGonagall muttered. "It's another Moody." She cleared her throat. "I assume you will not be harassing Miss Tonks again?"

"No, Professor." Harry replied, smiling innocently. Not for a good... three years or so. Then, however, she's fair game for harassment. He he. Hang on... I'm thinking the words for a giggle, rather than just giggling? Oh, lordy, what did I drink in the hospital wing? I blame Pomfrey, using Snape's potions. Snort. Oh, god, I'm doing it again. He tried snorting, and found his nose stubbornly refusing. I'm broken. Oh, when I get through with the creator, we'll be having words...

"Very well." McGonagall stalked off, muttering something about 'constant vigilance'. Harry turned back to Tonks, holding out his hand.

"My apologies again, Miss Tonks." She took his hand. "Maybe I'll see you around at some point."

"Maybe." Tonks replied, stalking away, muttering about insane celebrities.

Harry turned back to Hermione. "Is everyone gonna walk off muttering from me today?" He asked. Hermione grinned at him, and started to walk away, muttering about egotistical prats. "Hermione?"

When he caught up with her, they carried on their conversation. "So, are you feeling okay, Harry?" Hermione asked tenderly. "That injury looked pretty nasty."

Harry snorted. "Without that Quidditch armour you bought, it would probably have snapped my spine, Hermione." He said. "So, thank you, once again, for getting me a great Christmas present."

"But you're sure you're okay?" She asked, grasping his hand and pulling him to a halt.

"I'm fine, now." Harry said, squeezing her hand gently. "All better. Best of all, that injury sorted out my back problems. Feel good now."

"Prat." Hermione snorted, starting up again and giving his hand a tug. "I've been thinking more about the Stone."

Harry debated the idea of hiding behind a statue of armour and make a 'oh no, Hermione's thinking' joke, but decided that he really didn't want to be put back in the hospital wing straight away, so just nodded. "Me, too. Doesn't it seem curious that it's been brought to the school now?"

"Frankly, yes." Hermione replied, her face scrunching up as she worked her way through it. "There's no reason to bring it to Hogwarts. Why would you hide a Stone at a school?"

"I have a better question." Harry said. "Why would you bring a dangerous and highly magical artefact into a school, when there have been rumours about Voldemort trying to regain his old strength? Surely it would be better to simply hide it under a Fidelius or a blood ward somewhere. Why hide it up on the third floor, and then tell four hundred students not to go there?"

"Dumbledore has to know that by telling kids not to go somewhere, he's gonna make the kids go there. It just doesn't make any sense to me."

"He must have a reason." Hermione said softly, uncertainly.

"I believe that." Harry replied firmly. "The question is: What is the reason? Is it a test of the school defences? Can they withstand Voldemort? Is it a test of the bloody 'Boy-Who-Lived'? A test of teacher loyalties? Is it all a coincidence?"

"I don't believe in coincidence." Hermione said, slowing down. "But, it could be any one of the others."

"I do believe in coincidence." Harry said, pulling her to a halt. "Coincidences happen every day. Is this one?" He bit on his lip for a moment, then carried on walking. "I just wish there was some way to use that bloody 'Heir' status."

"'Heir'?" Hermione asked. "What does that mean?"

Shit... I really need to start remembering that this is not my Hermione. Ideally at some point before 7th year. "Uh... Heir of Hogwarts?" He replied uncertainly.

"You're an Heir of Hogwarts?" Hermione asked dramatically. "Wow!"

Harry pulled her to a stop again. At this rate, we'll never get back to the bloody common room. "Why are you 'wow'ing, Hermione?"

"Don't you know what that means?" She squealed.

"Yes, I do know. Do you?" He replied.

She was about to answer... then shook her head. "No. What does it mean?"

Harry sucked air through his teeth for a moment, before grinning sheepishly. "Hmm, tough question. Do you want to know what it actually means, or what people like Ron Weasley think it means?"

"What it actually means." Hermione said, her face morphing into its usual 'gimme knowledge!' look.

"In basic terms, I have the ability to Portkey through the wards of Hogwarts, since the blood of a Founder runs through my veins. The

anti-Portkey wards the Founders set up are among the most powerful ever created.”

“What’s a Portkey?” Hermione asked quickly.

Harry sighed. “A Portkey is a form of magical transport. Basically, when a Portkey is activated, you’re dragged into a cyclone of magic, and whisked wherever you need to go. It’s very fast, something like one mile every 0.9 seconds, so you could go from Land’s End to John O’Groats in just over thirteen minutes.”

Hermione calculated for a moment. That was extremely fast. “Could you give me that in English?”

“It’s known as hypersonic velocity. Basically means that a Portkey travels at the equivalent of Mach 5.2, or 1,787 metres per second.” He grinned at her. “You could get to America in under an hour. Not even Concorde can match that. Personally, out of all of the magical ways to travel, that’s probably my favourite.” He thought for a moment. “Or, rather, that’s the one I dislike the least. Then there’s apparition.”

“What’s Apparition?” Hermione asked.

“You’ve seen Star Trek. Think of it as the equivalent of beaming down somewhere. Problem is, it’s limited in range, and it’s slower than a Portkey. Plus, it’s very easy to ward against. That’s why being an Heir of Hogwarts doesn’t allow me to Apparate in Hogwarts grounds. Each Headmaster and Headmistress has added their own anti-apparition wards when they assume office. There’s something like forty different anti-apparition wards over the Hogwarts grounds. Even the Founders themselves wouldn’t be able to do it.”

“Oh.” Hermione looked a little crest-fallen. “Is that it?”

“Yep.” Harry said, looking pensive for a moment. “The only other possible benefit would be if I ever wanted to apply to be Headmaster, here. Because I am a Founder’s Heir, my application would be given a little more consideration, but that’s it. I wouldn’t automatically become a teacher or Headmaster, based solely on my blood-line.”

“Makes sense.” Hermione said. “What would people like Weasley think it means?”

Harry snorted. “He probably thinks I’d be like royalty. People think that the Founders have massive vaults under Gringotts, containing millions of Galleons, and that I could take over the Wizarding world with just a snap of my fingers.”

Hermione pouted. “Couldn’t you? That would make things so much easier.” She looked at him coyly. “Please?”

Harry just grinned. “Sadly, no. The Founders created a school, a very good, very old school, but that’s all they did. They didn’t change the world. They simply gave English witches and wizards a place to learn.”

“Hmph.” Hermione looked at him oddly. “Why do people make such a big deal of it, then?”

“Why do people play up to being related to the Royal Family? It doesn’t get them anything. They’re not in line to ascend to the throne. They’re not actually Royals themselves. They’re just a minor branch of an old, famous family. Same with me. The Potters are a minor branch of the Gryffindor/Ravenclaw line. It doesn’t really mean anything.”

“Oh.” Hermione bit her lip again, then carried on walking. “Come on. We’ve got potions.”

After a quick stop to gather their Potions textbook and supplies, the two headed for the dungeons. Harry had asked Professor Dumbledore to teach Potions lessons for a fortnight upon his return to school, but Dumbledore had taken to the lessons with a passion he’d forgotten, and extended the teaching.

During the lessons, Dumbledore would teach, explaining why the ingredients reacted with each other, why it was necessary to chop in a certain way, and why it was a bad idea to throw slightly explosive compounds in other peoples’ cauldrons. All elementary things that Snape should have taught.

While Dumbledore was giving his lecture, Harry started flipping through his textbook. The book contained 'standard' potions, from 1st year to 5th year. Harry quickly found one of the last ones to be taught to students, and chuckled to himself.

"Mr. Potter?"

An elbow to the ribs, again courtesy of Hermione, brought Harry's attention back to the present. "Ye gods, woman," He hissed softly to her. "I've just got out of hospital, and you're trying to send me back?" Hermione pointed weakly at Dumbledore.

Harry looked up. "Yes, Professor?"

"Was something in my lecture amusing, Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore asked, a hint of disappointment in his tone.

"Sorry, sir." Harry said, giving a watered-down version of his 'puppy-dog' look. "I saw something in my textbook that amused me."

Dumbledore nodded. "And would you care to share that little nugget of amusement with the rest of the class, Mr. Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "Not really, sir."

"I must insist, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore said firmly.

With an immense sigh, Harry nodded. "Well, sir. I thought it was funny that the anti-Hangover potion isn't taught until seventh year. Especially since we can get in to Hogsmeade in third year. I think it would be beneficial to teach that say... fourth year."

Dumbledore smirked, for just a moment, then nodded. "Very well. Class, thanks to Mr. Potter, we shall today be brewing the Hangover remedy potion."

Hermione scowled at him, then quickly turned the pages in her textbook, until she found the potion. This is it? How easy's that? It was a simple potion.

The rest of the class caught up with Hermione, then glanced at Harry, smiling warmly at him. This would be a nice, easy day for them. And profitable, if they could save some until the next Hogsmeade weekend. Harry laughed to himself, steepling his fingers and reminding himself of a cartoon with yellow people. Exxxxxcellent...

After handing in twenty vials of hangover potion, the class was dismissed. Dumbledore vanished quickly, probably rushing back to do his actual job of running the school. Harry and Hermione were among the last in the lab, putting away the remainder of their ingredients.

"Mr. Potter." A silky voice interrupted Harry's packing. He looked up, to see the face of the hated potions professor.

"Snivellus!" Harry said warmly, taking a deep breath. "I thought I could smell something. To be honest, I thought I'd stepped in something outside."

Snape snarled. "I am a professor, and you will address me with respect."

Hermione finished packing, and headed for the door, not wanting to be in the same room as the vile creature.

"The day I address you with respect, 'Batman', is the day Satan goes to work in a snow-plough." Harry shoved his book into his bag, then looked sharply at Snape. "Why are you speaking to me? This is against the rules, you know." He tutted loudly. "10 points from the faculty, for being a dunderhead."

Snape growled, pulling his wand.

"You really want to think about that, Snivellus." Harry said conversationally. "You're hanging on by a thread, you know."

"You're just like your father!" Snape spat. "He was arrogant, as well."

"Was he?" Harry beamed. "I think that's the nicest thing you've said to me, creep." He wiped a mock-tear from his eye. "Get's me," He tapped his chest, just above his heart, "right here, it does."

"I will have you expelled, Potter! Just wait."

Harry suddenly sobered up, standing up to his full height, eyeing Snape with a death's-head glare. "Listen to me, you little glob of tuberculotic sputum. I own your pale, skinny hide. Threatening me? Bad idea." He suddenly smiled evilly. "You dick about with me, and I can have you up to your arse in Dementors by this time tomorrow."

Harry clicked his fingers, causing Snape's wand to go flying out of his hand, and into Harry's. "Just think about that." He threw the wand over his shoulder as he turned around, walking out of the room while whistling a jaunty tune.

Behind him, he could almost hear Snape seething in impotent rage.

As he left the room, Snape could hear Harry singing in the hall. "And I know it's gonna be... a lovely day!"

Author's Note: I just wanted to clear up the whole 'Heir of Hogwarts' thing. In this story, it really doesn't mean anything, apart from giving him the ability to portkey through the wards. That'll be important, later on.

– CHAPTER NINETEEN –

Funny Valentine

January rolled into February. There hadn't been any attempts on the Philosopher's Stone, and Fluffy was still guarding the entryway.

Harry and Hermione still battled for the top spots in all subjects. Since they were best friends, it wasn't really a battle, more a friendly tussle. It wasn't quite Greco-Roman wrestling in chocolate pudding, but Harry was prepared to wait for OWL year for that.

There was one thing Harry was really starting to dread: February 14th... Valentine's Day. In the previous timestream, Harry and Hermione didn't really celebrate that particular holiday. As far as they were concerned, they were in love, and showed that everyday. Why bother with a commercial holiday designed to sell cuddly toys and over-priced gift cards?

However, his Hermione had been dead, relatively speaking, for almost a century. The Hermione he was with now had led a sheltered life, shunned by her peers for her startling intelligence and fierce devotion to learning.

I can send her something nice for Valentine's. Maybe a bouquet of yellow roses. Nice, but not overly romantic. A symbol of friendship. I'm sure she'd like them. Harry thought.

He was sat at the breakfast table, and thought hard. With a screech, Hedwig appeared in the mail hole, soaring down to her master.

"How do you always know, Hedwig?" He asked softly. "You're such a beautiful owl, aren't you?" Hedwig preened for a moment, looking at Harry with her big, amber eyes. "And you're so clever."

"Harry?" Hermione's soft voice cut into his staring contest. He looked up, to see her sit down next to him. "Have you got a letter?"

He shook his head. "No. I was just thinking of sending a letter off, and Hedwig came swooping down." He tickled her under her chin. "She's such a clever, pretty owl, aren't you?"

Hermione just smiled, reaching across Harry to add her own tickles. Hedwig hooted softly, soaking up the attention. "She's not just your pet, is she? How is it possible that you have a familiar at age eleven? Most witches and wizards can't do it until later in life."

Harry shrugged. "Dunno. As soon as I saw her, I felt something... different. I can tell when she's tired, or in pain."

"When was she in pain?" Hermione asked immediately.

"She got into a fight with one of the school owls. He must've been trying to use some cheesy owl pick-up lines on her." Harry changed from tickling her chin to tickling her belly. "Hed's a lady of class, aren't you, girl? Nothing but the best for you."

Hedwig hooted again, seemingly agreeing with Harry. Harry quickly glanced at Hermione. "Do you have some parchment and a quill?"

Hermione dipped into her bag, producing the required items. While Harry was writing out a note, she looked at Hedwig, and leaned in. "You're an Animagus, aren't you? Some kind of karate-kicking cha-cha dance instructor." Hedwig looked at her and winked, the owl equivalent of a smirk on her face, before bobbing over to Harry, who tied his completed note to her leg. He leaned in close to whisper a destination to her. Hedwig nodded, gently nuzzled his ear, and leapt into the air, her powerful wings carrying her straight to the mail hole.

Harry turned to Hermione. "So... what's on the agenda for today?" Valentine's Day dawned with snow. It was the first thing Hermione noticed as she opened her eyes. That, and a nice aroma, which permeated her room, and wasn't there when she went to sleep. She sat up, glancing around the room. There were bundles of yellow roses arranged everywhere.

She got up, reaching for the nearest bundle. She found a card, the chicken-scratch used to inscribe it immediately identifiable as Harry's alleged 'handwriting'. She read it, a warm feeling growing in the pit of her stomach.

To my best, my beautiful, My Only, Hermione. Love, Harry.

Each of the cards said the same. She smiled warmly, before heading to the shower.

Harry woke up, a silly grin on his face as he realised that Hermione would be waking up about now, and finding his handiwork over her dorm room. He shot out of bed, racing to the shower.

He got into the common room, sitting down on the navy blue loveseat closest to the stairs. He only had to wait a moment, before Hermione came down, dressed in her robes, with a yellow rose attached to the front.

As soon as she saw him, she rushed over, giving him a 'Hermi-hug', which included an extra squeeze and was held a few seconds longer than the standard issue hug. "They're beautiful, Harry. Thank you." She gave him a kiss on the cheek, both of them blushing.

Bloody hell! Harry thought, as he felt his cheeks heating up. I've had sex with a variation of this woman for almost five years! I've done things to her that I could never tell her parents. Or anyone in a position of authority in most governments. And now, when she kisses me on the cheek, I'm blushing like an eleven-year old! What's wrong with me? You are an eleven-year old again, Harry. Who asked you, anyway

Hermione's thoughts were a little more innocent. He's so sweet! Why am I blushing? It was just a friendly peck on the cheek. You'd like it to be a bit more, wouldn't you? A traitorous part of her brain responded. Shut up.

Harry cleared his throat. "Wanna go to breakfast?"

The two made their way into the Great Hall, hand-in-hand. They went to their usual spot, and loaded up on the heavy breakfast foods Hogwarts offered.

“Wanna snowball fight later?” Harry asked, not quite meeting Hermione’s eyes. She nodded, without looking at him.

“Oh, hell.” Harry muttered, taking Hermione’s hand and squeezing. “Why are we both blushing, Hermione? Is it ‘cause it’s Valentine’s Day?”

Hermione, still blushing, nodded quickly, then waited a moment for her hair to catch up.

“Let’s just forget it’s Valentine’s, shall we? You’re still my beautiful best friend. Why should flowers make you embarrassed?”

Hermione cleared her throat. “It’s, er... It’s not just flowers, Harry.” Hermione said softly. “No-one’s ever given me something for Valentine’s. Ever.”

Harry smiled warmly. “Well... I’ll make sure I get you something every year, then.” He promised. “Did you like them?” Again, she nodded vigorously, her hair struggling to keep up. “Good. You can kick my arse later with snowballs.”

She grinned at him. The screech of owls filled the hall. Harry looked up, to see a number of owls heading directly for him.

“Oh, bollocks...” He muttered. They landed on the table in front of him. Harry began to untie the letters, piling them up next to his plate.

Tonks, sitting at the Hufflepuff table, noticed the growing stack, and suppressed a smile. Harry seemed to be a typical clueless male when it came to Valentine’s, although the lovely rose the girl next to him was wearing certainly caught her attention.

Harry finally pulled the last letter off the last owl, and sent them all back. He looked at the pile. Thirty-one letters... Thirty-one! If this is the work of the Weasley twins, I’m going to be most annoyed.

He opened the first letter, not recognising the handwriting.

Dear Harry Potter,

My name is Angela Poplar. As it is Valentine's Day, I thought this would be the best time to send this offer of marriage to you.

At this point, Harry stopped reading. You have got to be bloody kidding me! Marriage proposals? I'm eleven years old, for Merlin's sake!

Hermione looked over his shoulder, reading the first part of the letter, and sniggering quietly. Harry started to screw up the letter, picking up the envelope, noticing it was too stiff to be empty. With a trembling hand, he reached in to pull out a photograph of an older witch, appearing to be in her late twenties to early thirties.

"Oh, come on!" Harry groaned. "She's nearly old enough to be my mum!" The Wizarding photograph, an attractive witch in a small bikini, winked at him, blowing him a kiss, while demonstrating hand motions that would probably lead to arthritis in later life.

Harry turned to Hermione, a pleading look on his face. "Hermione, please help!"

Hermione just carried on snickering into her hand, shaking her head before dissolving into a fresh wave of giggles. Harry quickly opened the rest of the letters. There were three that interested him. The first was a bank statement from Gringotts. That was neatly folded and tucked into his robes. The other two were letters from parents of three of his classmates. With a quick Incendio, the pile of odd letters were destroyed.

Harry looked up in horror, as he read the first. "Uh... Padma? You got a minute?"

The pretty Indian student looked up when he called her name, and nodded. She moved down the table to sit opposite of Harry. "Something wrong, Harry?"

Harry just handed the letter over to Padma, who started to read, her face slowly becoming more ashen the more she read. "I... I didn't know... Why would he do this without asking me?"

Hermione looked up at the trembling tone of her year-mate. "What's wrong?"

Harry just looked down at his breakfast, not quite willing to answer the question himself. Hermione glanced over at Padma. She took a deep breath, swallowed, and looked at Hermione. "Uh... My... My father has sent an offer of marriage to Harry."

Hermione was in the midst of taking a sip of her orange juice, and started to choke at the announcement. After a moment of squeaking, she swallowed, clearing the fluid from her throat, and coughed. When she got herself under control, Harry rubbing her back gently, she looked at Padma, disbelief written all over her face. "What? Why?"

Harry cleared his throat. "Padma, I have no idea why this has happened. Could you give me a hint?"

Padma blushed, glancing around. "Uh... It's a pureblood custom. Arranged marriages between politically powerful families. The Potters are a famous family, and an alliance between Potter and Patil would be a great boon for my family."

Harry looked startled. Even in the original timeline, he'd never really delved into Pureblood politics. Far too much trouble. "Uh, Padma? Please, please don't take this the wrong way, but how exactly do I respond to this?" Quickly anticipating a slap, he surged ahead. "I'm not thinking about marriage at this point in my life, and I don't know how to answer your father's question. And, when I do eventually marry, I'd like it to be because I fell in love with the girl, not because of a political or pureblood match."

Padma looked up. "Well, if you explain that to my father, he should accept it." She looked down at the letter. "I can't believe he wouldn't talk to me about it first."

Harry was a little relieved that Padma had taken it well. There was another problem. "Padma, could you hang around for a minute?" She looked at him, confused, before nodding. "Good." Harry turned on the bench. "Susan? Do you have a minute?"

Susan Bones, the pretty red-head in Hufflepuff, looked up, blushing when she saw the famous 'Boy-Who-Lived' talking to her, quickly whispered something to Hannah, who was sat next to her, then stood up and came across to the Ravenclaw table. She sat down at Harry's gesture, and looked at him, the furious blush still staining her cheeks.

"What can I help you with, Harry?" She asked shyly.

Harry picked up the other piece of mail. "Do you know a lady called Amelia Bones?"

Susan nodded, "She's my Aunt," then blushed even more intensely. This was going to be an awkward conversation...

"I, uh... I received a letter from her this morning." Harry said, extending the piece of parchment to Susan, who quickly took it and read, blushing even more and squeaking incoherently. It took a full three minutes for Harry, Hermione and Padma to get Susan to calm down enough to speak again.

"Er... Harry... I... uh..." Susan looked like she was about to pass out. "I... she's always... uh... trying to arrange a... a, uh... a good match for me." She stammered.

Harry just nodded. "I can understand your Aunt trying to find you a good match." He said delicately. "However, I... uh... At this point, I'm not looking for marriage. For Merlin's sake, I'm only eleven years old."

Susan squeaked something, and tried to stand up. Padma came to his rescue. "Susan, don't take it personally." She gave Harry a sly glance. "I don't think our young Mr. Potter's gotten out of his 'toys' stage enough yet to notice girls."

Harry's brow arched, and he gave Padma a piercing look. His voice, when he spoke again, was husky, and sent chills down the spines of

all three young ladies. "I'll have you know, Miss Patil, that I got out of my 'toys' stage quite a while ago. I'm fully capable of noticing attractive young ladies." And the only one I want is sitting next to me, smelling nice and looking cute. Damn her!

Padma stared at him for a moment, before smiling ruefully. "Serves me right for fishing for compliments, eh, Harry?" Padma looked at the letter her father had sent. "I don't understand it, though. Why did my father send this to you? He should have sent it to the Head of House Potter."

Harry, while Padma was pouting, had pulled out his bank statement from Gringotts, and was flicking through the list of minor transactions. "I am the Head of House Potter." He said absently, not looking up. "Emancipated wizards at age eleven can take control of the family." His family ring became visible for a moment, and then disappeared.

He looked up, to see Padma and Susan staring at him. "What?"

"You're the House Head?" Susan squeaked. "Do you know what that means?"

Harry just looked vaguely confused. "Er... yes?"

"Harry, as the Head of an Ancient and Noble house, you actually have the title of Lord, and a seat on the Wizengamot." Padma exclaimed. "Now I understand why my father sent you this letter. It would be a great honour to join with the Potter family."

Shit! Run! Hide! Obliviate? Harry's brain screamed. No, too severe. For now. "I still stand by what I said, Padma." Harry said firmly. "When I do eventually marry, which won't be for a while yet, I want it to be because I fell in love with the girl, not because it's politically convenient."

Hermione cleared her throat next to him. He glanced at her, noticing a slight frown on her face. Long years of exposure to that frown made him recognise what it meant. "I'm not looking for love at the moment," Because I already love Hermione, and would die for her in an instant, "but I'd be glad to have two extra friends."

Susan blushed again, and tentatively held out her hand. "I'd be honoured, Lord Potter." She said.

"Hey! None of that. My friends," Which is pretty much Hermione, at this point, "call me Harry. I'd be honoured if you'd do the same."

Susan nodded, while Harry extended his hand to Padma. "So, what do you girls have planned for today?"

As it turned out, none of the four had any plans, so Harry suggested a trip down to Hagrid's hut. The two other girls had never met the immense Groundskeeper, and Harry hadn't really spoken to him since the Quidditch match.

They trooped down to Hagrid's hut, hearing the customary 'back, Fang!' as the door opened. Padma and Susan squeaked as they saw the half-giant, and took a discrete step backwards.

"Harry!" Hagrid near-shouted, picking Harry up and squeezing him. For a moment, Harry was worried that he'd black out.

"H-Hagrid," He rasped.

"Yes?" Hagrid said, still clutching onto the boy.

"I-I'm seeing... spots!" He gasped, before Hagrid let go, allowing him to drop to a knee, before taking a deep breath, and hauling himself back to his feet. Man, I think that armour's useful for more than just Quidditch. "Thanks. I feel better now." He smiled at the half-giant. "Thanks for taking me to the hospital wing."

Hagrid just nodded, muttering something as he took a step outside the hut, shutting the door behind him. "What can I do for you four, then?"

Harry wondered why Hagrid wasn't inviting them in, when he remembered what had happened originally. "I just thought I come down and see how you are, Hagrid, and to introduce Susan and Padma here to you."

Hagrid held out and hand, introducing himself to the girls. "I'd love to stay and chat, Harry," Hagrid said, looking behind himself guiltily, "but I'm a bit busy at the moment."

Eyeing him suspiciously, Harry took a step forward. "You're hiding something, Hagrid." Harry said, staring at the older man, who looked away immediately. "You can't deny it."

Hagrid looked at Harry, and slumped in defeat. "I can see why they put you in Ravenclaw, Harry. Don't miss a trick, do you?"

"No." Harry replied. "You've got something you're not supposed to have, haven't you?" He wiggled his eyebrows. "Or is it a someone you're not supposed to have there? Is there a future Mrs. Hagrid?"

Hagrid, grumbling, opened the door, allowing a blast of frighteningly warm air shoot out of the door. "You'd better come in."

The five trooped inside, finding various places to sit. Hagrid grabbed a pair of oven gloves, heading over to a cauldron hanging over the fire. He reached in, pulling out a large, black... something. He placed it on the table.

"You have got to be bloody kidding me!" Harry said, letting surprise creep into his voice, drawing in a breath of scorching air, hot coals forming in his lungs. "Where the hell did you get a dragon egg, Hagrid?"

"Won it off a stranger down the pub a couple of weeks ago, Harry." Hagrid replied, sounding remarkably unconcerned for a man holding what would eventually turn into a walking combined blast furnace/flamethrower. "I told you when we went to Gringotts that I've always wanted one."

"It's illegal, Hagrid." Hermione said primly. "Dragon eggs are Class-A restricted goods! If you get caught with this you could be arrested, Hagrid."

Hagrid, still burbling with excitement over finally owning a dragon egg, carefully ignored Hermione's rebuke. He smiled at them as he put the egg back into the fire, before shooing them out.

Harry led the way as the foursome returned to school. "This could be a problem." He said, stopping on the path.

"This could be a disaster!" Hermione exclaimed. "He could be sent to prison just for having that egg."

Susan looked around. "Is this what being your friend is like?" She asked softly, smiling slightly. "Running around, having very odd days?" Padma looked very interested in the answer.

Harry shrugged. "Pretty much, yeah." Hermione nodded next to him.

"This could be the start of a beautiful friendship." Padma said, linking her arm with Susan's.

Hermione smiled softly. "I'd put money on you in a bare-knuckle fight against a troll. How good are you against dragons?"

Harry thought for a moment, before a silly grin erupted on his face. "Pretty good. Anyway... we need to a way to help Hagrid get rid of an illegal dragon. Who do we know who is devious, evil, twisted, and capable of getting away with murder, mayhem and destruction?"

The three girls looked at each other, before a single word burst from all three mouths. "Weasleys!"

"Gentlemen!" Harry's voice carried through the Great Hall, before he sat down at the Gryffindor table, in between the terrible twosome. "I have need of your expert technical assistance."

"Do tell, ickle Harrikins." The twin on his left stated.

"We're all ears." The twin on his right added.

Harry leaned forward, lowering his voice. "I need a way to remove an illegal dragon from this school. Frankly, the two of you leapt to the forefront of my mind."

The twins whistled in unison. "You don't think small, Harry." Fred, the twin on the left, replied softly.

"However, it's certainly possible." George concluded.

"Do tell."

"Well, our brother Charlie works at a dragon reserve in Romania-" Fred began.

"And we're sure that he'd be able to help." George finished.

Harry nodded. "That's good, but there's the small issue of getting said dragon from here to said preserve in Romania."

"Not easy-"

"But doable."

"Would you care to share how this difficult task would be accomplished?"

"Not-"

"Now. But-"

"Soon."

Harry looked from one to the other, before groaning slightly. "Could you either speak completely in unison, or have one of you speak the whole sentence? Frankly, my neck's getting sore."

Both grinned at him. Evil little gits. Harry thought fondly. In all his life, he'd never met anyone quite like the Weasley twins. Thank Merlin.

“Very well, Harry.” The twins spoke as one. “We’ll send a letter to our brother, explaining the situation.” The peered intently at him. “How did you get a dragon egg?”

“I didn’t.” Harry replied glumly. “Hagrid won it in a card game a couple of weeks ago. Silly git’s been heating it in a cauldron since then, and it looks about ready to hatch. Frankly, need to get it the hell away from here before it destroys the school.”

The twins stood. “We’ll send it now.” They dashed away, as another redhead approached. Oh, bloody hell. Just what I didn’t need.

“Potter. What are you doing at the Gryffindor table?” Ron snapped testily. “Finally decided to join a proper house?”

Harry just arched an eyebrow as he stood up. “Any fool can be brave, Weasley.” He said pompously. “It takes someone with intelligence to win a proper fight.”

Ron sneered. Looks remarkably like Draco like that. Harry thought idly. “Oh, yeah? What would you know about it?”

Harry just sniggered as he walked away from the impotent git, heading back to Hermione. Don’t want to leave her alone. After all, it’s only Valentine’s Day once a year. His last view of the Weasel was watching him spatter gravy over his robes. The more things change...
Author's Note: I've just had a thought (Quickly: Duck and Cover!) Has anyone noticed how damned hard it is to write a decent first year? The reason for this is: nothing bloody happens! Apart from the fight with Quirrell, which I wrote ages ago, it's a pretty lame year. Personally, I'm looking forward to second and fourth year. So much chance for chaos, mayhem, and more amusing put-downs for the Weasel-King! I'll be back soon, folks. TTFN!

– CHAPTER TWENTY –

The More Things Change...

Harry was still waiting to hear from the Weasley twins about contacting Charlie to remove Hagrid's baby dragon. It had been a week since the letter was sent, and Harry knew the egg would be hatching soon.

This time, however, he had absolutely no desire to go wandering in the Forbidden Forest to chase dead unicorns. There were more dangerous things he could be doing with his time, like re-arranging his sock drawer.

He spent the next week hanging out with both Padma and Susan; it was weird, he'd spent seven years as Parvati's year-mate, but he knew already knew more about Padma from just his recent short contact. Susan was difficult at first, as she had an armour-plating of shyness around her, which took some serious effort to breaking. However, once he'd managed to crack through, he found her to have a base sense of humour and an evil laugh, a result from living with the head of the DMLE. This sense of humour managed to intimidate Neville a little, as he appeared to be nervous, and unsure as to whether he was allowed to laugh, whenever he was in the same class as the others. Seems like being apart from the Weasel has sapped what self-confidence he had. Harry decided that he'd try and build that up.

Harry was enjoying lunch in the Great Hall, with Padma on his left, Hermione on his right, and Neville sat in front of him at the Gryffindor table. They were talking about the differences between Arithmancy and Mathematics; well, Hermione and Padma were talking about that, Neville was ducking sprouts being thrown at him by Ron and Harry has using his wand to fire them back, considerably harder. Ron and Seamus, both covered in tattered shreds of green vegetable, looked deeply offended when Harry pointed out that, with the green on their robes, they looked almost Slytherin.

"Slytherin?" The redhead sputtered. "I can't be a Slytherin, I'm good!"

“God, you annoy the life out of me, Weasley!” Harry snapped suddenly. “You told me that all Slytherin’s are evil, slimy and can’t be trusted. Why, ‘cause they’re prejudiced?”

Ron nodded. “That’s exactly right! They’re evil!”

Harry laughed sardonically. “Don’t you get it? You’re prejudiced against them!”

“What? I’m not prejudiced! I just hate Slytherins!”

Absolutely thicker than a brick sandwich. Hermione chuckled to herself. He makes two short planks look like a computer.

“I don’t hate Slytherins.” Harry said firmly, gathering the attention of practically everyone in the hall. “The be frank, my only prejudice is prejudiced people. People who think that First-generation witches and wizards shouldn’t be allowed to study magic? Don’t like them. People who use the word...” Harry paused for a moment, collecting himself, “‘Mudblood’, they should all get a hard kick in the butt. People who think they’re better than others, simply because of bloodlines? Don’t like them.”

“You’re describing Slytherins!” Ron crowed, convinced that his argument had just been won.

“I haven’t finished.” Harry said sharply. “You are labelling everyone in Slytherin as dark and evil. Are they?” Harry turned to the Slytherin table. “Are you all dark and evil?”

Nobody uttered a syllable.

“My dislikes are individualised. I don’t like Malfoy, ‘cause he’s an arrogant, bigoted git. It has nothing to do with the fact he’s a Slytherin. It’s just his... personality.” Harry suppressed a snigger, before turning to face Ron. “Stick him in Ravenclaw, I still wouldn’t like him. I don’t like you, ‘cause you’re an arrogant, bigoted git.” He suddenly clicked his fingers together. “You know, apart from hair colour, you two are very similar.”

Hermione, Susan, Neville and Padma started giggling.

"What?" Malfoy shouted. "I'm nothing like him! He's poor!"

"I'm nothing like him!" Ron shouted at the same time. "He's evil!"

"He's eleven!" Harry retorted. "What's he gonna do? Crucio me?"

"Probably." Ron replied.

"Well, if I turn up to breakfast suffering from the Cruciatus, then we'll agree that he's evil. If I'm okay, then I think we can give him the benefit of the doubt. Now, sit down, idiot!" Harry sneered softly. "You know, it's better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and actually prove it." Harry turned back to his table, suddenly aware that every eye in the Great Hall was firmly fixed on him. "Sorry." He muttered, before sitting down.

"Mr. Potter." Dumbledore's sharp voice filled the hall. "Please continue. Your point of view, that of a Muggleborn student with less than a year's experience of the Wizarding world, is refreshing. I would like to hear more."

Harry leaned in close to Hermione. "He wants me to get on my soapbox?" He stood up. "What would you like to know, sir?"

"Your opinions on the Wizarding world in general, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore said, leaning back in his golden throne.

Harry took a moment to collect his thoughts. Okay, a chance for a good rant. God, I love it! He looked around the Great Hall, noticing everyone staring at him. He started to make his way to the stage, intent on stopping just in front of it.

"One of the very first things I heard when I entered the Wizarding world is that there are evil witches and wizards. And that there wasn't a witch or wizard who'd gone bad that wasn't from Slytherin."

As expected, there was a cry of protest from the Slytherin table. Harry just raised a hand. "Let me carry on, please." He said in a firm voice, which was instantly obeyed.

"Now, personally, I don't see how that's possible. Why would an ancient artefact like the Sorting Hat build a house of evil? That doesn't make any sense. So, while I was in Diagon Alley, I looked up the four founders. Slytherin wasn't evil."

"Yes, he was!" A voice shouted from the Gryffindor table. Harry instantly knew who it was.

"Shut up, Weasley!" Harry shouted back, not even bothering to look. "If he was evil, why would he help three good witches and wizards set up a school? That's not typically the work of an evil genius. Why would three good witches and wizards spend time with an evil wizard?"

"So, I looked him up. Slytherin didn't believe that Muggleborns shouldn't be taught magic. What he believed was that the separation between the magical and Muggle worlds should be absolute."

Dumbledore coughed slightly. Harry turned to look at him. "Sir?"

"No, please, carry on." Dumbledore said quickly. "This is fascinating. Although, I wouldn't mind looking at some of these books myself."

Harry nodded, then turned back to the students. "There are about four hundred students in this school at the moment. Probably a hundred to a hundred and fifty are Muggleborns." Harry glanced at Dumbledore, who nodded.

"One hundred and twenty-three." He said quietly.

"One hundred and twenty-three." Harry repeated, turning back to the audience. "That means that there are 246 Muggles who know about the magical world. That doesn't include siblings or grandparents. Then, there are the half-blooded students, who again have Muggle relatives who know about Hogwarts. If any of those people went to the papers and told them about the magical world, the Statute of

Secrecy would be absolutely wiped out. They'd be no way to Obliviate everyone. The whole Muggle world would know about us, but they wouldn't understand us. Their lack of understanding would lead to fear, and that fear would fuel violence against us. We're outnumbered 2000-1. We'd be slaughtered, man, woman and child, before we could even think about hiding or fighting.

"Now, Slytherin didn't hate Muggles, he just knew that they spent an inordinate amount of time coming up with increasingly painful ways of killing wizards. That's what Slytherin feared. He believed that Muggleborn students should be taken away from their families so that the magical world remains secret." Harry cleared his throat, wishing desperately for a glass of water. A House-Elf popped in front of him with a glass, then vanished again.

"I can understand Slytherin's point. Personally, I don't agree with it, but I can understand it." He took a long swig of water. "One thing Slytherin prized above everything else was cunning. He was ambitious and cunning. Those are the traits of Slytherin house. Not evil."

"You're wrong!" Weasley shouted. Harry ignored him.

"During my reading, and keeping in mind that 'all dark witches and wizards are evil', I looked up some of the worst criminals in the last fifty years. I found the worst four. Lord Voldemort," pause for flinching, "was a Slytherin."

"Hah! I told you!" Weasley shouted. Fred and George, growing seriously annoyed with their brother, cast a Silencio on him.

"Thanks, guys." Harry said, grinning at the twins. "Bellatrix LeStrange," Harry noticed Neville stiffen slightly, "was a Ravenclaw. She was Voldemort's chief enforcer. She came from the home of the intelligent, yet followed Voldemort." Harry took another drink. "Bartemus Crouch Junior, another high-ranking Death Eater, came from Hufflepuff house. And finally, Sirius Black, the traitor to the Potter family, came from Gryffindor." I hope you never hear this speech, Padfoot. Harry thought wistfully.

“So, if all evil witches and wizards came from Slytherin, what happened with those three? Can anyone tell me? No, of course you can’t. Slytherin prizes ambition; Voldemort’s ambitious. Ravenclaw prizes intelligence; LeStrange used her intellect to decide that she believed in Voldemort’s cause. Hufflepuff prizes loyalty: Crouch was loyal to Voldemort, even going to his death in Azkaban, never wavering in his support for his Lord. Gryffindor prizes courage; Black sold out my parents to Voldemort, even though everybody knows he was the Secret-Keeper.” Harry decided to personalise things a little. He stepped towards the Slytherin table. “Mr. Flint. Marcus. May I call you Marcus? Let me ask you a couple of questions.”

The burly sixth-year looked a little nervous at being in the spotlight, but nodded.

“What do you plan to do when you leave Hogwarts, Mr. Flint?” Harry asked politely.

Flint looked thoughtful for a moment. Either that, or he’s constipated. Harry thought softly. Flint cleared his throat. “I wanna play Quidditch.”

“Quidditch?” Harry asked, sounding politely confused. “But, you’re a Slytherin. Shouldn’t you be planning murders? After all, as a Slytherin, you’re automatically evil.”

Flint looked confused. It reminded Harry of watching a rusty tractor trying to plough a concrete field.

“Don’t worry. Which Quidditch team would you like to play for?”

Flint grinned. “Appleby Arrows.”

“Are they any good?” Harry asked. “I don’t really follow professional Quidditch.”

Looking a little wistful, Flint replied. “They used to be top of the league. Slipped to midway down the table.”

Harry nodded. “I assume that you’d like to play for them, and get them back to the top of the table?”

Flint nodded, grinning.

“But... you can’t do that. It’s not evil enough. And as a Slytherin, you simply must be evil. Perhaps you should plot eliminating the other teams’ players.” Harry turned away, not giving the confused Flint a chance to answer, before heading back to the centre of the room. “So, it doesn’t sound to me like he’s evil. It sounds like he’s ambitious.

“Percy Weasley.” Harry stood in front of the Gryffindor table. “What do you want to do when you leave Hogwarts?”

Percy stood up, pompously puffing out his chest. “I want to work at the Ministry.”

Harry nodded, inwardly rolling his eyes. “I see. You’re currently a prefect, so I assume you’d like an important position. Possibly even being the Minister of Magic someday?” Percy nodded once, looking a little wistful himself.

“So, you’re also ambitious. You and Mr. Flint both want to become the best in your chosen fields. Yet Mr. Flint will have a harder task, simply because he’s a Slytherin.”

Harry leaned against the stage. “Personally, I kinda like the idea of becoming a spell creator. Maybe invent a shield that can block the unforgivable curses. And that’s an ambitious project in itself.” He pointed to Flint, Percy and himself. “All three of us have ambitious goals.

“However, one of my main complaints about the Wizarding world is the issue of blood.”

Malfoy stood up. “There’s nothing wrong with being a pureblood!” He snapped.

“I never said there was, Malfoy. But, there’re things you need to consider.”

Malfoy scoffed, before glaring at Harry. "And what's that, oh great Potter?"

Ignoring the Malfoy scion's silly tone, Harry carried on. "If you keep following the pureblood traditions, you'll find inbreeding starts to occur. There's not many so-called 'pureblood' families left. Also, look at the number of children that are being born. Malfoy's an only child. Pansy is an only child. The Patils are twins, but they have no brothers and sisters. One of the few exceptions of this are the Weasleys, with seven children. The number of purebloods is decreasing. At the moment, it's necessary to start marrying second- and third-cousins. Soon, it'll be first-cousins, then brothers and sisters.

"Without an infusion of fresh blood, through the Muggleborn witches and wizards, the pureblood families will simply be gone within the next two centuries. Bearing in mind the life-span of witches and wizards, I believe that some of us will even see it.

"Your blood doesn't matter. The only thing blood has to do with anything is keeping you alive. It doesn't matter if you're a thirtieth-generation pureblood, or a first-generation. We are all magical beings, and that is all that should matter."

Harry started to stride back to his seat. "Here endeth the lesson." He sat next to Hermione, who was smiling warmly at him, before grabbing a sandwich.

Dumbledore stood up, gaining the attention of everyone in the hall. Slowly, he began to clap, quickly followed by the rest of the faculty. Even Snape. Soon, all the students were clapping, except for Malfoy and Ron Weasley. Harry ducked down in his seat, blushing a bright red.

"You did very well." Hermione whispered, rubbing his back slightly. The following morning, Harry was sat at the Ravenclaw table, waiting for Hermione and Padma to join him. A very soft cough next to him brought Harry's attention to Susan Bones. "May I join you?" She asked shyly.

Harry nodded, gesturing to the bench next to him. Susan tentatively sat down. Next to her, Tonks practically threw herself onto the bench, nearly spilling everyone currently sitting to the floor.

“Wotcher, Harry.” She said, reaching for a bowl of cereal.

“Morning, Tonks. Would you care to join us for breakfast?” Harry asked sarcastically.

Tonks blushed slightly, looking at him with a sheepish grin. “Wouldn’t mind.”

Hermione and Padma approached, Padma taking her usual place across the table, while Hermione sat next to him. “Good morning, Hermione!” Harry said joyously. “May I say you look lovely this morning?”

Hermione blushed. “You may, Mr. Potter.” She said pompously.

Padma, Susan and Tonks exchanged a quick glance. While on Valentine’s Day, Harry had said he wasn’t looking for marriage at the moment, it was clear to all three of them that when he was looking, Hermione would be on the very top of a very short list. All three stifled giggles, which Harry, completely oblivious to any female except Hermione, didn’t notice.

Another throat-clearing grasped Harry’s attention. He saw Neville Longbottom, blushing slightly.

“Longbottom.” Harry said neutrally. “Something I can do for you?”

Neville just coughed slightly. “I was wondering if I might join you, Mr. Potter.”

“Are you here on arse Weasley’s orders, Longbottom?” Harry asked casually, ignoring Padma’s (very ladylike) snort at the name given to Ron.

"No." Neville said, blushing even more. "I had to listen to his rant last night about how you were trying to corrupt everyone. Said Slytherin's are evil."

"Oh, we are." Another voice said from behind Padma. Harry glanced up to see Blaise Zabini stood there, his hands held casually behind his back.

"Zabini, right?" Harry asked. He quickly turned to Neville. "Sit down, man. You're making the place look untidy."

Neville sat next to Tonks, blushing at the beautiful Metamorph. Harry stared at Blaise.

"That's 'Zabini', Mr. Potter." He gestured to the bench next to Padma. "May I join you?"

Harry looked at Padma, who gave him a quick nod, before blushing slightly. Harry gave a slight wave, before Blaise sat down.

"So... you gonna try and turn us evil?" Harry asked, reaching for a platter of bacon.

Blaise arched an eyebrow, maintaining an expressionless face. "Yes. Is that a problem?"

Harry shrugged. "No, not really. Live fast, die young, and leave a beautiful corpse. All good with me." He stared at Blaise, admiring the way Blaise didn't squirm like most people. "Any reason you chose today to sit with us?"

"Yes." Blaise replied.

God, he's like Spock. Couldn't ask for a more emotionless person if you tried. "Do you feel like sharing the reason with us, or just letting us bask in your presence."

Blaise looked thoughtful for a moment. "I'll allow you to bask. It's good for the skin."

Hermione snorted, giggling at Blaise's deadpan air.

"I like you." Harry said, grinning at the Slytherin. "Come the revolution, I'll deal with you last. So, I imagine I annoyed a lot of the Slytherins yesterday."

"You did."

"Was Malfoy crying and whinging like a little bitch?" Harry asked, looking like a child who'd just found out Christmas was to become a daily event. "Was he ranting to everyone about how disrespectful I am to purebloods?"

"He was." Blaise said. "He said that your comments were an insults to all purebloods, and that you should be put down like the little half-blooded mongrel that you are." Again, all this was said in a deadpan voice.

"Ah, I'm just devastated." Harry replied, still grinning. He looked at Padma. "What about you, Pad'? Were you insulted by my comments? After all, if I'm insulting purebloods, might as well try and collect the full set."

"I cried all night." Padma intoned, looking serious. "I felt absolutely violated, you evil little beast." She couldn't maintain the expression, and started giggling.

Hermione glanced over at the doors, groaning slightly, before tapping Harry on his arm. "Incoming."

Harry looked up to see a pair of grinning red-haired maniacs rushing towards him. He moaned, before letting his head drop onto the table. "Should have just stayed in bed." He muttered.

"Ah, little Harrikins!" The twins said in unison, slumping onto the bench next to Hermione, winking at her. "We have news!"

Harry looked up, a look of genuine horror on his face. "And what news do you bring, Hell's Carrots?"

Fred reaching into his pocket, pulling out a slightly burnt piece of parchment. "We have a letter from Charlie."

Tonks perked up. "Charlie? Your brother?"

George looked at her for a moment, eyeing her up and down. "Yes. You know Charlie?"

Tonks nodded quickly. "Yep. He was a couple of years ahead of me. Nice guy." She sighed, her face and hair turning red.

Fred and George sniggered, before turning serious. "You should read this, Harry."

Harry took the note, quickly assimilating the information. He turned to the group of individuals, before passing the note to Hermione. She read it, and quickly looked up, nodding at Harry once she'd guessed his intentions.

"So... who here feels like getting into some real trouble?"

The removal of Norbert from Hogwarts went smoothly, all thanks to Hermione's tremendous planning. She'd listed all the things that could possibly go wrong, 151 items... damn, that girl was smart! And thought up enough plans to counteract every single one.

At the end of the planning session, Harry could feel himself going cross-eyed. It was certainly a better plan than 'let's just hike the damned box to the top of the Astronomy Tower'. So, it had all gone swimmingly.

Of course, Harry spent another week consoling a bawling Hagrid. It turned out Hagrid was not the best drunk in the world. Since losing his 'baby', he had to be constantly reassured that yes, he had friends who cared about him, and no, he wasn't a monster for getting rid of said 'baby'.

"Hey, Hermione." Harry said as he entered the Ravenclaw common room. She was sitting on the love seat in front of the fire, the light from the flames making her look like her head was surrounded by chocolate flames.

"Hi." Hermione responded absently, reading through a book with far too many pages.

"What'cha reading?" He asked, slumping next to her.

Hermione tilted the book slightly, so she could carry on reading while Harry read the title. "Alchemy: The Truth." Harry snorted. "Party on."

"I'm trying to find out more information about that stone." Hermione replied, glaring lightly at Harry. "I still can't figure out why Professor Dumbledore brought it to Hogwarts. I thought if we found out more about it, we'd have some clue."

We've discussed this. Harry thought absently. "It's too much of a coincidence that it's here, now. I don't trust coincidences."

Hermione nodded. "We could go and ask him." She offered.

"Oh, I could see it now." Harry snorted. "'Headmaster, why have you brought the Philosopher's Stone, a highly-powerful and dangerous magical artefact, into a school full of nosy children the same year that Harry Potter starts here?' Yeah, that'd go down well."

Hermione giggled. "Maybe... maybe a little more tact would work on that plan."

"Tact?" Harry managed to look and sound offended. "I'll have you know, Miss Granger, I'm full of tact and diplomacy."

"Only 'cause you never use it." Hermione retorted, wriggling away as Harry's hands went to her sides.

After the fight, which Harry won due to Hermione's unconditional surrender at Harry's far-too-talented fingers, she'd put the book away, and pulled out some homework. After an hour, she noticed Harry's occasional-but-speeding-up sighs.

"Harry, you okay?"

“Honestly? I’m bored.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose cutely. “That’s nice.” She wrote another sentence on her essay, already on her third roll of parchment (for a 12 inch Potions essay; Snape was not going to be happy).

“I mean, I’ve done my homework. I’ve had a brief but silly fight with a Snap-Dragon in the greenhouse to decide who gets to keep my tie. There’s no Quidditch practice for the next four days. I’ve not seen any books in the library that make me tingle.” He leaned back on the couch, and closed his eyes. “So, yeah, I’m bored.”

“I’m glad you’re working hard.”

“You aren’t listening to a word I say, are you?”

“Moonstone, ground finely.”

“Did I mention that my nose is on fire? And I have fifteen wild nifflers down my trousers?”

Hermione bit the end of her quill, then carried on writing. “Swish and flick.”

“They’re drawing obscene caricatures on my inner thigh. You feature heavily in them. Which is interesting, because I’m not sure the human spine can flex like that.”

“Win-gar-dium, make the ‘gar’ nice and long.”

“I’ve decided that, once you hit 16, I’m going to tattoo ‘Property of Harry Potter’ on your right buttock.”

“Check Hogwarts: A History, I’m sure it’s in there.”

Harry rolled his eyes, and crossed his legs, one resting on his knee. He started rolling the top of his sock up and down, forming a ring around his leg. A sudden itch on the underside of his foot made him glance around quickly before pulling his shoe and sock off, scratching

the itch. Looking down, he saw his abandoned sock in a ball on the floor, rolled up firmly and compactly.

Philosophically, a thought is said to be a pattern matching exercise, trying to match current events to previous experiences. Biologically, a thought is a chemical process inside the frontal lobe of the cerebral cortex. In terms of Hogwarts, though, Harry had just had a testicle-pinger of an idea; a new sport that would shake the foundations of the Wizarding World for centuries to come; Sock Quidditch.

“Hermione, if you need me, I’ll be in the library. If you don’t need me? Probably still be in the library.” Realising that the dramatic phrasing had wheedled down to a whine, Harry shrugged, and disappeared. Hermione, finished with her paragraph, looked up, noticing the empty chair next to her.

“Harry?”

After an hour in the library with ‘Quidditch through the Ages’, a quill, parchment and Pince with a weird look on her face, Harry was ambling down the fifth floor corridor, just past the Charms classroom, where the twins had commandeered a collapsed tunnel as their own personal common room.

“Gentlemen, and I use that term very loosely, are you in there?”

“Ickle Harrikins!”

“What can we do for you?”

Harry wandered down the darkened passage, and sat down in front of the twins, who appeared to be messing around with a tube and a pile of grey powder.

“I need help, boys. Weasley help.”

“No worries, Harry-”

“-How can we help?”

"I need you to have a word with your Quidditch team. I've got a suggestion, and I get a feeling that Ollie isn't going to listen to me, especially if he hears 'Harry wants to suggest something to you'. How long did it take for him to come out of the locker room after our game?"

"About an hour. He seemed kinda nervous, and unhappy about sitting on his broom."

"How curious..." Harry cleared his throat. "Anyway, I've had an idea, and I'd like the opinion of Hogwarts' premier mad scientists and miscreants to help me out."

"We're in!"

"Er, guys, you don't even know what I'm asking."

"True. Still, we're in."

Harry smiled as he held up his parchment, and pointed out what he'd written. "What do you think about this?"

Harry had one more thing he had to do before his plans came to fruition. Even though he'd decided to not rescue Sirius yet, he'd still make sure that the man had adequate resources while he was locked into Azkaban. As such, he'd been down to the kitchens, got a basket full of food, and snuck away to Hogsmeade to pick up a small parcel.

Back in his dorm, he wrote a note, before pulling out a pebble he'd picked up on the walk back. With a moment of concentration, he tapped his wand, "Portus", and dropped it onto the back.

"Activate!" With the command, the basket vanished into a trail of light. "Hang in there, Sirius." He said softly. "We'll get things sorted soon."

In the retirement home for the criminally insane, a large black dog was sitting on his haunches, licking something he couldn't reach when human. (A/N: Come on... we all know Sirius would do that.) He heard a spinning sound, and had to stamp down the urge to bark loudly. No point in hiding as an Animagus if I'm gonna let the bloody Dementors know about it. He thought idly, as a picnic basket

materialised in his cell. Without thinking, he changed back to Sirius, plucking the note off the top.

Dear Padfoot,

Happy Birthday! I know I said that things were going to get better. He's a start for you. Enclosed in this package are some new clothes, some good food, and even a small birthday cake.

I trust that you listened to my last note. Sirius will be getting too weak to last. Padfoot needs to take control.

By the way, I'm having problems with my crossword. Can you help?

Stripeclaw

Sirius opened the parcel, ignoring the new clothes, heading straight for the cake. Chocolate! He bit down, feeling the chocolatey goodness melt on his tongue. It's still warm... my god! It took seconds for the cake to be demolished, before he started on the rest. After he was finished, he looked up out of his window, seeing the Dog Star shining brightly. Thank you, Stripeclaw. I hope someday I can repay you for this.

"Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen!" Lee Jordan sat at a small table, a piece of parchment in front of him. "Welcome to the exhibition game of Sock Quidditch, created by Harry Potter of Ravenclaw. A brief description of our new sport, before I announce tonight's game.

"There are six Quidditch games played per season here at Hogwarts, each House playing three games, and the winner of the Cup is decided purely on points scored. The average game lasts 73 minutes, and the average winning score is 230 points. House Quidditch players have an average school career of 4 years, and roughly 6 players go from each graduating year in to professional Quidditch." He put the parchment down, and looked at the assembled audience of about 100 people, a collection of Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor. "However, for hardcore Quidditch fans, 6 games a season isn't enough, so we need more.

“Now, let me explain the differences between the two sports. In Sock Quidditch... Oh, and to Harry, I’m sorry, but I’m going to end up calling it Squidditch.” Everyone suddenly swallowed a laugh as a high-speed black sock ball hit Lee directly in the face. “Anyway, Sock Quidditch,” he pronounced the words clearly, “features the same team structure; 3 Chasers, 2 Beaters, 1 Keeper and 1 Seeker. The Quaffle is used to score goals, each goal being worth 1 point. There is only a single goal, which is a one-metre square, and Chasers aren’t allowed in that coloured semi-circle in front of the goal. The Beaters don’t use bats but tubes, which attract the two Bludgers, and then fire them out; if the Beater hits the Chaser, they’ll have to drop the Quaffle, and will not be able to pick it up again until somebody else has touched it. The game is played on foot, and, in case any Slytherins have managed to sneak in here on the sly, this is a non-contact sport. The game plays until the snitch is tagged. The seekers for the team have to hit the snitch with a colour-change spell, the colour indicating which side has won. No wands are permitted in the game, except for the seekers, who are using special wands that can only fire colour-change spells.”

Lee looked at his parchment, then smiled. “Sounds confusing, folks, but trust me when I say, watch the game, and then you’ll understand. Tonight’s game is an exhibition game, and a grudge match between the Captains. Firstly, the Lion’s Pride: Captain and Keeper Oliver Wood! Chasers Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet and Angelina Johnson! Beaters Fred and George Weasley! And Seeker, Cormac McLaggen!” The Gryffindor Quidditch team came out of the crowd, and formed up around Oliver, all dressed in red t-shirts. “And their opponents, Potter’s Secret Seven!” Jordan flinched as another sock hit him in the face. “Damn it, Harry!” He shook his head. “Sorry, their opponents, Norfolk Enchants: Captain and Seeker Harry Potter! Chasers Padma Patil, Susan Bones and Neville Longbottom! Beaters Hermione Granger and Nym-” A sudden growl echoed across the pitch. “Beaters Hermione Granger and Tonks! And Keeper Blaise Zabini!” The six first years trooped out with Tonks, who, at her disguised 5’2”, was about the same size, all dressed in white t-shirts, ready to face their older, faster and considerably stronger competitors.

“Granger? You’ve got the buck-tooth bookworm on a Quidditch team?” Ron Weasley elbowed his way to the front of the crowd. “And a Slytherin?”

Harry was about to launch in to a tirade about Ron’s prejudice, his rampant stupidity, his disgusting eating habits and anything else he could think of (and, to be honest, there was plenty), when all four Beaters raised their tubes and shots practice Bludgers at Ron, the Weasley boys hitting him in the face, the girls hitting him a little lower down.

“Anyway, our referee for the evening is Professor Flitwick, who very kindly agreed to spend his time away from the seedy underworld of Hogwarts’ staff gossip to assist Harry and Hermione with enchanting the equipment for this evening. On a technical note, the plan this evening was to use actual socks. Unfortunately, Professor Dumbledore objected to us using his Christmas presents for a sporting event, so we’re using something called Squashed-” Frantic whispering was suddenly heard. “Sorry, Squash balls as Bludgers and the Snitch, and a red ball called a ‘basketball’ for the Quaffle. Now, ladies and gentlemen, will you all please stand for the Hogwarts school song!” Four Beater’s tubes were suddenly pointed at Lee Jordan, who decided that cowardice was better than being hit in the face with a hard rubber ball or four. “Then again, we all know the school song. Places, please.”

The two teams went to their ends, with Harry and Oliver meeting in the middle for the pre-game handshake. “Ready, Potter?”

“Oh, yeah.” Harry held his hand out, and smiled as Wood gripped his hand hard. Harry, not to miss out on an opportunity to distract and irritate his opponent, rubbed his thumb over Oliver’s knuckles, mumbling to himself. “Such lovely soft hands...”

Wood jerked his hand away and shuffled backwards towards his own goal, before one of the Weasleys approached him. Harry smiled as he overheard “...just trying to distract you. Focus, Ollie!”

The whistle blew, and suddenly the Quaffle bounced off the floor high in to the air, where Angelina, utilising her extra four inches of height,

snatched it out of the air, throwing it in a long, loping pass to Katie, who started to run forward, the Quaffle tucked securely under her arm. A dead-eye shot from Hermione made her drop the ball, and she could only watch Padma, moving with the speed of a striking cobra, scooped up the loose ball, and started to run down the pitch, dribbling the ball, basketball style.

This was Norfolk Enchants' strategy; two Muggle-raised students who had both been forced to play basketball in junior school in PhysEd classes, and were used to using the ball like Michael Jordan. A bounce pass across to Susan, immediately bounced over to Neville, and Longbottom's head-down sprint towards the goal ended up with a powerful shot, that Wood just managed to stop.

Luckily for the Lion's Pride, Katie Bell was Muggleborn, and was able to appreciate how sneaky Harry was; if either of the Weasleys hit the Quaffle while it was being dribbled, it wouldn't count as a drop, but she had played both Basketball and Netball in school, and therefore stormed past Susan, taking the dribbled ball out of her hand, and passing it to Angelina, who tucked it under her arm, running forward, Alicia barely a meter behind her.

Tonks managed to clip the Quaffle with her Bludger, but Alicia scooped up the loose ball, launching a spear of a shot that sailed past Blaise.

"One-nil to the Lion's Pride!" Lee Jordan sounded jubilant that Gryffindor had taken an early lead, especially against a Ravenclaw captain and a Slytherin Keeper. "Zabini's beaten with a rocket shot from Spinnet."

Harry, standing next to Blaise, clapped him quickly on the shoulder. "Don't worry. Lucky shot."

"Easy to say when they've got Wood at their end."

"Let's see them do that again." He ran through the list of tactics he'd assembled with his team through their training sessions, and smiled to himself. "Pinball!"

Blaise nodded, and launched the ball towards Susan, who immediately shot it to Neville, who ran maybe two paces before firing it at Padma. The rapid fire passing meant that the three younger chasers didn't make much distance up the field, but it was difficult for the Lions' Chasers to get anywhere near the Quaffle. Harry saw his moment; his Chasers were ready, their Chasers were out of position, and both Hermione and Tonks had the Bludgers. "Break!"

His three Chasers shot forward, the lightening-fast running that 11 and 12-year-olds are capable of. Neville faked a shot, drawing Oliver out of position, and bounced it to Padma, who scored a gentle, underarm shot. She curtsied to Oliver, and then ran back, giggling.

"One-all, and a smooth move there by the Enchants. How will the Pride deal with this?"

"Time out!"

"Time out called by the Lion's Pride!" Flitwick blew his whistle while bouncing up and down, clearly having far too much fun for a school night.

Oliver was surrounded by his team-mates, who were already sweating, unused to the physical running that this version entailed. "Okay, ideas, anyone?"

George Weasley was leaning on his tube, looking pensive. "No. We can't use the Bludgers to distract them, and their passing is pretty accurate." He snorted. "They've not played real Quidditch, so they're able to adapt better."

"Okay. Angelina, take the ball. Run at them. Alicia, you'll be in front of her, screening her from view. Katie, you go behind, ready to scoop up the loose ball. Cormac, any sign of the snitch?"

McLaggen just shook his head. He was the least in shape of all the players, and was already panting, red in the face and looking hopeful that medical attention was lined up at the after-game party. Or, at least, a nice bottle of oxygen.

“Right then, let’s show these kids some Gryffindor pride!”

The team broke, and Wood launched the ball straight to Angelina, and the three of them began a close-knit charge down the pitch.

Harry had expected this tactic, was one he had practiced himself, and had developed the perfect counter for.

“Claws! Punch and slide!”

Hermione nodded, scooping up a loose Bludger, firing it at the Quaffle. While the ball was dropping, Padma slid, feet first, underneath Angelina’s arm, catching the Quaffle, before passing it to Susan, who, with Neville in support, was offered a free pitch, with only one Weasley guarding it. A quick pass to Neville, only a fraction of a second before the Bludger would’ve hit, left Neville one-on-one against Wood, who, this time, did not manage to make the save.

“Two-one to the Enchants, and it looks like Potter is more than able to match Wood, tactic for tactic. Come on, Gryffindor!” Lee Jordan looked puzzled for a moment, and then realised what was wrong; McGonagall wasn’t berating him for showing favouritism. Cool!

The crowd, by the point, were starting to get more vocal, as they realised that, while it wasn’t regular Quidditch, it was fast, it was fun, and it was something you could cheer about. Except for Ron, who looked outraged as this... Sacrilege!

“Puffs! Artillery!”

Susan was already charging down the pitch, behind Angelina, who looked baffled at the fact that she wasn’t being closely marked. Tonks shot the first Bludger at Johnson, who dodged, straight in to the path of the second Bludger that Hermione had passed to Tonks. Susan scooped up the dropped ball and shot, which Wood caught. A long high pass, over the heads of everyone, landed the ball in Katie’s waiting arms, and she shot, scoring passed a surprised Zabini.

“Two-all, a magnificent breakaway from the Lions, and now we’re seeing some tactical acumen from both captains.”

The sudden blast of a white spell distracted everyone for a moment as Harry was trying to nail the Snitch, which had finally come out of hiding. The Snitch, moving extremely quickly, dodged the spell, and then vanished up towards the ceiling. In the momentary distract, Angelina managed to intercept a pass, and scored against Blaise, leaving them 3-2 in front. The game progressed for another ten minutes, leaving the score at 6-3 for the Lion's Pride, with another impromptu session of both Seekers taking pot-shots at the Snitch.

"Time out!"

Flitwick blew his whistle. "Time out for the Enchants."

"You know, I helped with the charming of that damn thing, and I'm still surprised at how fast it moves. How we doing out there?"

Hermione was breathing hard, unused to the physical activity. Even so, her aim with her Bludgers was scarily precise. "I'm knackered. I'm not built for running, I'm built for reading."

Neville, red in the face, nodded. While he was a slightly podgy boy, the baby fat was covering a layer of slab-like muscle, honed through years of wrestling plant-pots in to submission. "It's impossible to get a ball past Wood. Got the grace of a cat with the eyes of a hawk."

"Harry, get the Snitch. With all due respect, you guys can't compete with kids a few years older than you for much longer." Tonks, her hair white to match her team, hefted her Beater tube. "Plus, the Weasleys are getting better at blocking the Bludgers. It's going to get away from us without the Snitch."

"Time!"

The players all got back in to position, and Tonks was proven correct; the stamina and longer legs of the older players soon started to show how conditioning won matches, as the Lions were winning 9-5 when the Snitch was spotted. Harry saw it before McLaggen and shot three spells at it, watching as the Snitch danced out of the way. It shot towards the Enchants' goal, and Harry chased after it, tripping over,

ironically, Tonks, before he landed painfully on the floor. From his prone position, he nailed the snitch, which had just ducked a red spell from McLaggen.

Flitwick blew his whistle, and then fell off the platform he was standing from, the excitement too much for him.

“And that’s it! It’s over! Norfolk Enchants wins 20-9!” Lee Jordan blew out a breath. “Well, folks, I don’t know what you were expecting today, but I don’t think that was it.”

Harry wandered over to the announcer’s table, rubbing his bruised elbow gently. “That, ladies and gentlemen, was Sock Quidditch. What we’d like to do is arrange an informal league, open to all houses, all years. All you need is 7 people, from any house, and we can play. Since this isn’t a school-sponsored event, I’d like to get an Underground Quidditch League set up. We’d need at least 6 teams for that, but I’d like more; in a school with about 400 people, we should be able to rustle up at least 10 or so. Are you in?”

A cheer erupted from the crowd, and two new teams signed up then and there; Cedric Diggory’s ‘Beware of the Badgers’, and Eddie Carmichael’s ‘The Talons’. The rest of the crowd promised to talk to their housemates as they left, leaving the two teams, Lee Jordan and Flitwick left in the room.

“Well played, Lions. Oliver? Good game, man. And I’m sorry if I make you nervous.”

Oliver laughed. “It’s okay. I have to say, it’s a good way of distracting people; trying to ignore same-sex come-ons from an 11-year-old do kind of catch your attention.” He shrugged. “You played well. Guess we’ll just have to wait for a league game for use to get our revenge.”

Harry laughed and nodded, and they all left, heading back to their common rooms. It had been a good day.

Author's Note: That's pretty much all for First year. Apart from the whole, you know, fighting Voldemort/Quirrell for the Philosopher's Stone. But, we're getting to that. If anyone's confused by the rename, I looked through, and found far too many "Harry Potter Second

Chance" story titles. So, since I nicked Quantum Leap for his time-travel experience, I thought I'd use that name.

Second Note: It was my brother's idea for Sock Quidditch. Blame him. His screen-name's MagnaMorbius. He's also my Beta...

– CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE –

The Philosopher's Stone and Beyond

It was getting close to time. Harry knew this, but had been putting it out of his mind. With all of his changes to the time-line, he'd left Quirrell alone, simply because he didn't want to change history over the Philosopher's stone. With the exception of making friends, there wasn't really anything worth changing until third year.

So far, he'd been doing well. The addition of Blaise Zabini to his small circle of friends would make a radical difference in the days to come. The Zabini family led the neutral families, those who would not get involved with the Order or with the Death Eaters in the war to come. With Blaise on his side, there would be a chance to get their support, a worthwhile goal.

The other main additions to the timeline would work well for him. He and Hermione were closer than ever. He knew, in his heart, that this was not his Hermione, but she had the potential to become so, and far sooner than the original time-line. This time, they would be pure for each other; no bad history between them, no Ron belittling her at every opportunity, no crying Cho tackling him in the Room of Requirement, and no lust potion-fuelled 'romance' with Ginny Weasley.

With 'Stripeclaw' sending supplies to Sirius, including food and new robes, the man should be able to withstand Azkaban in better shape than originally, too. When he broke out in just over a year, Harry would be able to make sure he got settled in Grimmauld Place immediately. With no need to run, it would give him some much needed stability.

Before he could deal with the future, though, he had to worry about the now. The Philosopher's Stone. He'd kept Hermione abreast of the latest intelligence regarding it. She agreed with him that Snape seemed unlikely to be after the stone, but wasn't sure which of the teachers it would be.

Because neither of them had been caught sending Hagrid's baby dragon to Charlie, they hadn't been into the forest to chase down the dead unicorns. That meant that Hermione was essentially flying blind into the situation.

He wasn't, though. He knew the truth of what was happening. And he knew it would be happening soon.

Ron Weasley was still fuming over his many encounters with Harry Potter over the course of the school year. Instead of going into Gryffindor, where a hero of his stature was supposed to go, he ended up in the home of the nerd... bookworms. He'd made friends with Ravenclaw students, two Hufflepuffs, several Gryffindors, and even one slimy Slytherin. It was this last one that annoyed Ron.

He was the perfect candidate to be Harry's friend; he was brave, resourceful and clever. And Harry had turned him down. It just didn't make sense.

Even more annoying to Ron was that Harry was making friends with the near-squib Longbottom. Neville had hung out with Ron earlier in the year, but after last Halloween, had started to drift away. Ron looked up when the very subject of his musings appeared.

"Ah, Neville!" Ron said jovially, determined to win back his 'friend'. "How're things going, mate?"

Neville, for all the rumours about him, was not a stupid person. He knew that Ron was insanely jealous of Harry Potter, and to a lesser degree, the people who associated with him. Since Neville was now one of those people, he guessed that Ron was trying to suck up to him to become closer to Potter.

"Things are going fine, Ron. Thanks for asking." Neville finished fishing around in his trunk, grabbing his books, before straightening up. "Well, as much as I've enjoyed this chat, really must get going." Neville straightened up, heading for the door.

"What are you doing at the moment?" Ron asked, not willing to let Neville out of his sight.

Shit. Neville thought. "Just going to the library. Got some last minute assignments to get up to date. End of year exams are only a fortnight away."

Ron's face lost all colour, becoming that special bright white that only Daz can give you. His jaw flapped for a couple of moments, before it clamped shut and he swallowed. "Can I come with you? I forgot all about the exams..."

Neville led Ron into the library, going to the back corner, where Hermione had commandeered a table during her first week. Even now, nobody else dared use it. It had become the unofficial group table for the new group of friends.

Blaise had taken to helping the group revise, due to several key factors; he was naturally gifted at Potions, something none of the others were as good at as him, and second; he was a Slytherin, meaning that he was utterly favoured by Snape.

The rest of Harry's friends expected good marks on the end of year exams, since Harry and Hermione were definitely the top two students in their year.

Neville dropped into his usual chair, pulling out his books and notes. Harry looked up, nodding with a warm grin at Neville, until he spotted Ron loitering at the end of the table. "Weasley." He said neutrally. "Something we can do for you?"

Ron shifted from one foot to the other uneasily, before he gathered his courage. "Uh... I was hoping I could do some studying with you."

Hermione glanced up, her eyes narrowing slightly. "Why?"

"What?" Ron asked.

"Why do you want to study with us?" She asked patiently. "Why wait until a fortnight before the exams before you start to study?"

"Uh... well... I was very busy before now." Ron stammered. "I only just managed to get some free time."

Hermione glanced at Harry, both of them sending a message of 'Bullshit!' with their eyes. Harry nodded slightly, and she rolled her eyes. "Fine." Hermione said, pointing at an empty chair. "You can join us."

Ron grinned and threw himself into the chair.

"But..." Hermione continued. "If you dick about, you're gone." She looked at Susan, Blaise, Padma and Neville. "We will not do your work for you." Ron nodded vigorously. "Now, what assignments have you got outstanding?"

The redhead reached into his bag, pulling out a stack of parchment almost two inches thick.

Oh, you have got to be kidding. Hermione thought, as she saw weeks, possibly months worth of assignments. "When are they due?"

Ron looked down sheepishly. "By the end of the week." He muttered.

Harry started to rub the bridge of his nose. "Ron," He said tiredly. "it's Wednesday today. You've got two days to do, what looks like, months of assignments."

"I know." Ron snapped. "That's not exactly helpful, you know!"

Harry's eyebrow raised, and his tone cooled. "There's no need to take that tone with me, Weasley. It's not our fault that you couldn't be bothered to do your bloody homework. What were you doing instead? Watching Quidditch? Playing chess?"

"What of it?" Ron snapped again.

"Nothing." Hermione said simply. "But like I said, we're not doing your work for you. We're here to revise, because we're up to date with our own work, and we want to pass our exams."

Realising that being defensive wasn't getting him anything, Ron switched tactics. "Okay, I'm sorry. But, if you could find some time to help me..."

Susan sighed. "What do you need?" Ron smiled warmly at her, as he took the first piece of parchment off his pile.

The group buckled down for almost four minutes, before it happened. "Ron, we said we're not doing it for you? Don't you think they'd notice if your assignment is in my handwriting?" Susan near-shrieked.

"You said you'd help!" Ron protested.

"And we said we're not doing it for you!" All six of them said to him as one. "Jesus, Weasley, which part of that didn't you get?"

Ron held up his hands. "I-I..."

"No." Harry said firmly. "Ron, if you want help, such as a suggestion on where to find a certain topic, we'll do that. If you want us to check your spelling after you've completed the assignment, we'll do that. If you want us to do your work for you so you can go back and listen to the bloody Cannon/Tornado match on the wireless, you can piss off now."

Ron just scowled, grabbing his parchment and shoving it back into his bag. "If you won't help, fine!" He picked up his bag and stalked out of the library.

"What a tool." Blaise commented dryly. He turned to Neville. "I pity you, my friend, having to share a dormitory with him."

Neville just nodded. "He snores, too."

All of them shuddered, before getting back to work.

The two weeks of revision passed smoothly, thanks to Hermione's perfect revision study guide. Even Snape's evil potions exam gained them all perfect marks.

A couple of days before the end of year feast, Harry watched Dumbledore receive a piece of mail. He could see from the arrogant nature of the owl carrying it that it was from the Ministry of Magic.

It will happen tonight. Harry thought, momentarily channelling Professor Trelawney. Dumbledore will leave the school, giving Quirrell the perfect opportunity to go after the stone. He chuckled. Quirrell... it wasn't nice knowing you.

"It's time." Harry said ominously, later than night. Hermione looked up from her book, noting the intense look on Harry's face, and the slight glow of his eyes. She'd only seen this a couple of times, but she knew that when Harry was feeling an intense emotion, his eyes actually lit up. It was kinda cool...

"T-time?" She stammered.

Harry nodded, standing smoothly. "We have to go now. It's starting." He held out his hand to Hermione.

"This is dangerous, Harry." Hermione said, taking his hand and pulling herself to her feet. "This could get us in real trouble."

The two started to walk to the portrait hole. "I prefer to think of it as the lesser of two evils. Yes, we could get in trouble, but what would happen if Voldemort or someone like him was able to get their hands on the Philosopher's Stone? It provides an unlimited amount of gold, not to mention an immortality serum. That's two kinds of power I wouldn't want Voldemort to get hold of."

"Two?"

Harry just looked at her. "Immortality, and economics. With those, he could literally take over the world without a drop of blood being spilt. Rather scary, if you ask me."

The two passed through the corridors, descending from the fifth floor, where the Ravenclaw common room was, to the third floor, and the forbidden corridor.

Hermione pulled him to a stop, ducking into one of the many niches in the wall as Mrs. Norris stalked past. "Harry?" she whispered.

"Hmm?" Harry whispered back, keeping a close eye on the demonic feline.

“Can we really do this?”

Harry chuckled. “Yes.” He said quietly, but firmly. “We can do this. We will do this, Hermione. You and me... we can take on the bloody world.”

She grinned at his declaration, and took his hand. “Let’s get it done.”

Without another word, the young heroes entered the forbidden corridor, Harry silently waving his wand at the locked door. With a muffled ‘click’, it opened, revealing the contents to Hermione for the first time.

“What the bloody hell is that?” She whispered harshly, spotting the sleeping Fluffy. The sound of soft music filled the background, overpowered by Fluffy’s roaring snores.

Harry just glanced at her. “I do believe that’s a Cerberus, Hermione.” He just pointed his wand, watching a bright red bolt erupt from the end, slamming into the sleeping dog. With another casual flick, Harry levitated the colossal animal away from the trapdoor it had been sleeping on.

“How’d you know that was there?” Hermione asked, drawing her own wand.

Harry just looked sheepish. “It’s about the only reason to have an immense guard dog in an empty room.” Ever since his Quantum Leap into the past, he’d become so much better at acting, he mused to himself.

“You know, this reminds me of a cartoon I saw when I was a kid.” He looked at Hermione, lowering his voice as he started quoting. “There’s nothing compared to the horrors that lurk, beneath the trap door. For there is always something down there, in the dark, waiting to come out.”

“Behave, Harry.” Hermione said, trembling slightly as she heard his ominous tone.

"Well, shall we see where the rabbit hole leads, Alice?" He asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Of course, White Rabbit." Hermione said. She was about to step forward, when she hesitated.

"I'll go first." Harry said, rolling his eyes as he jumped. Hermione peered through the trap door, seeing nothing in the darkness.

After a few moments, a deep, evil-sounding voice rang out "Berk! Feed me!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Funny bastard, aren't you, Harry..." She muttered as she jumped.

She fell for what felt like miles. I do hope I don't go 'splat' on the bottom. She mused absently. All too soon, she could see something rushing up at her. She braced herself, closing her eyes, only to feel something soft and squishy wrap itself around her. She opened her eyes to see Harry sat on top of the squishy mass, looking at her, his eyes twinkling.

"Hey, there. Fancy seeing you here."

Hermione scowled at him. "You have a rotten sense of humour, you know."

"I know." Harry smiled at her. "It's one of my many crosses to bear. Being the 'Boy-Who-Lived', I have so many. Incredibly intelligent, rakishly handsome... it's a wonder I stay sane."

"Sometimes I doubt that." Hermione mumbled. Harry just looked at her and grinned. Okay... rakishly handsome isn't that inaccurate. She thought. Damn him. Why does he affect me so much? Those were thoughts for another time, though. At the moment, she needed to concentrate on surviving the rest of the evening.

"So, where do we go from here?" Harry asked her, bringing her musing back to the present. "And what's this stuff we're on?"

Hermione's brain raced through her Herbology books. "Should have brought Neville." She muttered. "This is Devil's Snare, Harry."

"That's nice." Harry said slowly. "And why exactly would Devil's Snare be at the bottom of a trap door?"

"It must be one of the defences for the stone." Hermione said, already feeling the Snare start to grip her tighter. "It'll tighten on us until we die."

Harry just stared at her. "Huh... and we stop this... how?"

Flicking through pages in her mental textbooks, Hermione was silent for a moment, until she came upon the answer. "Heat! Devil's Snare hates heat and light. Damn, if only we had some wood, we could start a fire!"

Chuckling, Harry just raised his wand. "Or we could hit it with an Incendio and jump through the hole it makes."

"Or... we could do that, yeah." Hermione mumbled, looking embarrassed. She raised her wand. "Incendio!" A series of flames came out of the end of her wand, forcing the quivering plant to open a hole. Hermione jumped through, quickly re-aiming her wand when she landed on the floor, making sure to keep the hole open.

A moment later, Harry somersaulted through the hole, landing neatly on his feet. Hermione lowered her wand, watching the hole quickly reseal itself.

"Well... that was bracing." Harry said, looking around. "Shall we carry on?"

Hermione said nothing, just reached out and took his hand, following his lead. She started walking, wincing slightly as the path started to incline downwards.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked, noticing the wince.

Marvellous. Hermione thought, seeing the worry on his face. How do I answer that? “Uh... I, uh... I landed on my bum.”

Harry chuckled. “I’d offer to kiss it better, but the memory of that talk with your Dad last Christmas springs to mind.”

Heat rushed into Hermione’s cheeks as she realised the implications of Harry’s statement. Looking down, she mumbled. “I doubt you’d want to kiss my arse, Potter.”

Biting down on his lip was the only way he could avoid saying that in the future, she’d rather enjoyed that. He just pulled her closer, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “Do you want to rest up for a bit?”

Hermione stared at him suspiciously. For a moment, she’d almost heard a comment in her mind that made her blush even harder. Surely not... She pulled on his hand, forcing him to stop. “Harry?”

“Yes?” Harry stared at her intently.

“C-Can I... ask you something.” Hermione whispered.

“Hermione,” Harry said softly, “you can ask me anything, at any time. You know I won’t laugh at you, or tell you to leave me alone.” He squeezed her hand. “What’s on your mind?”

“Why are you my friend?” She whispered, even quieter than before.

“Eh?” Harry asked, leaning closer.

“Why are you my friend?” Hermione repeated, a little louder this time.

“A-Am... am I not good enough to be your friend?” Harry asked in a small voice. “Are you having second thoughts?” This was something that Harry had been fearing ever since he met her in Flourish and Blotts last August; his changes to the timeline would affect his relationship with Hermione negatively. Instead of becoming a couple sooner, he’d drive her away.

“Merlin, no!” Hermione exclaimed, squeezing Harry’s hand almost painfully. “That’s not what I meant at all, Harry! I’m not good enough to be your friend.”

Harry looked at her like she was a particularly stubborn stain on a favourite shirt. “Hermione... for the brightest witch to attend Hogwarts, you can be rather dim sometimes.”

Hermione huffed at him for a moment. “And what does that mean?”

“Hermione, have I, at any point in the ten, eleven months that I’ve known you, given you any indication that I think you’re anything other than a perfect friend?”

“No.” Hermione mumbled, looking down. She felt Harry’s callused fingers gently lift her chin up. She held her breath for a moment as she realised how close he was to her. Their lips were barely inches apart.

“And do you know why that is?” He asked softly.

“No.”

“Because, my sweet Hermione, you’re everything I could want in a friend.” Or a girlfriend, or a lover, or a wife. He added silently.

Hermione’s eyes shot directly to his, as though she heard his thoughts. “Harry... can I ask you something else?”

Harry shrugged. “Sure.”

“Do you remember... what you said to my Dad at Christmas?” Hermione started to nibble on her bottom lip, causing Harry’s eyes to drop as he watched her.

“Of course I do.” He answered after a moment.

“Did you really mean it?”

Harry just stared at her for a moment, drinking in the image of her face, superimposing it on the face of her older self, merging the two together. "I assume you mean the part about wanting to date you?" She nodded jerkily. "Hermione... how could I not want to?" He stared intently at her again. "Do you want to?"

She nodded, letting the gesture trail off. "More than anything, Harry. You can't know..." She shook her head. "The thing is, Harry... how will people react? The most famous wizard in the world dating a mousy, ugly, boring little bookworm."

"I don't know." Harry replied. "I want to date you, not some mousy, ugly, boring little bookworm."

Hermione rolled his eyes at his lying gesture. "Harry-" She broke off as Harry pushed her against one of the stone walls, his hands tightly on her shoulders.

"Shut up!" He hissed. "How dare you say such things about my girlfriend!"

She couldn't help but grin at his gesture. "Harry..." He shook his head. "Look... haven't you heard some of the gossip going around the school?"

"Nope. Don't listen to gossip." Harry replied simply, still staring directly in her eyes. Instead of making her uncomfortable, she found this oddly relaxing.

"Harry, people have been saying that you need to marry a pureblood, and make as many powerful babies as you can." She chuckled as a new thought popped into her head. "There's even a group of third years who have decided to try and become your harem."

Harry snorted. "A Harem? Why the hell would I want a Harem?" He saw Hermione's mouth open, and carried on. "There's only one woman I want... and she's stood about six inches in front of me."

Hermione's jaw snapped shut, and she blushed.

“Now, as much as I’d like to continue this conversation, we really should go and save the Philosopher’s Stone.” Harry resisted the urge to kiss her, and stepped back, not releasing her hand. “Let’s go.”

They carried on down the corridor, entering a large chamber. Harry heard a slight fluttering, and looked up. Ah, Flitwick’s flying keys. He glanced at Hermione. She wanted to practice flying. What better time than this? “Hermione?”

She’d made her way over to the other door, casting an ‘Alohomora’ on the lock. Nothing happened. She turned to face him. “The unlocking spell doesn’t work. We must need a specific key.”

Harry just pointed up to the small legion of flying keys. “Must be up there.”

She nodded, seeing the pair of broomsticks on the other side of the door they entered through. “Well... you’re the seeker, Harry. Why don’t you go and get it?”

“You wanted the flying practice, Hermione.” Harry replied, grinning at her. “Why don’t you go and get it?”

Mumbling under her breath, Hermione grabbed one of the battered brooms, mounting it carefully. “You’ll catch me if I fall?” She asked softly.

“I promised I would.” Harry replied, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, looking at her with pride on his face. “You can do it, Hermione.”

“I’ll try.” She said dubiously.

“No.” Harry said firmly. “Do. Or do not. There is no ‘try’.”

Hermione just rolled her eyes at the Star Wars reference. “You know I’m a Trekker, Harry. Star Wars was a bitter disappointment.”

“Just go and get the bloody key, will ya?”

She gave him a dirty look, then kicked off. For a couple of moments, she wobbled uncertainly in the air, before she gathered her wits, smoothing out the ride. She started to soar amongst the keys, looking for the one that should fit the lock.

"Look for a damaged wing!" Harry shouted up. "If it's been stuffed into a lock-"

"Yes!" Hermione shouted back, cutting him off. "If you know better, why don't you come up here and capture the bloody thing?"

'Cause I need you to be as prepared as possible. Harry thought, reaching out with his hand, summoning the other broom to him wandlessly. "The practice is good for you!" Harry shouted back, keeping the broom hovering next to him.

Hermione just mouthed a few words. From his prone position, Harry didn't catch all of them, but there did seem to be several anatomically impossible suggestions, as well as general comments about his sanity and parentage. She accelerated, searching through the keys with a methodical efficiency. Less than two minutes later... "Found it!"

Harry mock-cheered. "All right. Now, go get it!"

"I hate you sometimes, Harry." He heard her mumble as she accelerated after the key. She chased it around, circling round other keys that moved quicker, chasing her as she did the other. With a muffled yell, she grabbed the broken-winged key, as dozens of others slammed into the broom handle.

Hermione felt herself start to fall, the broom slipping out of her fingers. For an instant, gravity didn't exert its hold, until she started to fall. Harry... you promised...

She was halfway to the ground, following the law of gravity, when a strong arm wrapped round her waist, swinging her up onto a soft wooden handle. Without thinking, she wrapped her arms around her saviour's waist as the broom accelerated downwards, heading for the door.

Harry grabbed the key from Hermione's unresisting hand, throwing it towards the door, and using a little wandless magic to make sure it entered the keyhole. With a click of his fingers, the key turned, the door opening automatically. Harry aimed the broom at the just-opened door, accelerating to maximum speed as quickly as possible as he dropped.

The instant the broom passed through the entryway, he waved his hand, slamming the door shut behind them. He heard several sharp impacts in the door, the keys that had been pursuing them hitting heavily into the wood.

He pulled the broom to a stop, lowering it to the ground so they could both climb off. Hermione's hands were trembling as she clutched onto him. "H-Harry?"

Having to use a surprising amount of strength, Harry pried her hands loose, spinning round to look at her face. "Hermione? You okay?"

"You... you caught me..." She said slowly.

"As promised." Harry said, wrapping her in a firm hug. "I said I'd always be there to catch you."

She clung to him for a moment, as the terror started to subside. "Thank you." She said sincerely. I need to have a good long think about tonight...

Harry squeezed her a last time, then broke the hug. "So... we've had Professor Sprout's trap, the keys are obviously Flitwick's... I wonder what's next."

Harry moved forward from the antechamber, into a large darkened room. McGonagall's chess set. I wonder how good she actually is. A series of sconces along the walls ignited, revealing the giant chess set.

"Wizard's chess?" Hermione looked at Harry. "I can't play this!"

"I can." Harry said. "There's a couple of free spaces on the black side. What do you wanna be?"

Hermione glanced at the two free spaces; the king-side knight, and the queen-side rook. "I'll be the rook." She moved over to stand at the corner, looking at Harry nervously.

Harry mounted the knight's horse, grinning at Hermione. "I wonder just how good McGonagall is at chess."

"I'd rather not find out." Hermione said. "In chess, white moves first."

As she spoke, the white moved a pawn to A3. Harry grinned. "Pawn to D6!" The black pawn rumbled forward slowly. Harry looked up, seeing a white pawn move to H3.

"Queen to A4!" Harry commanded. The queen, looking rather vicious, moved forward, staring down at the pawn she was rapidly approaching.

The white side moved it's knight to F3.

"Bishop to F5!" Harry commanded. The white counter-attacked by moving it's knight to C3.

"Harry." Hermione called up. "That knight's in position to take your queen on the next move!"

"Not a problem." Harry said. "Queen to C2." The queen rumbled forward, decimating the pawn in that square. "Checkmate."

The large sword in the white king's hands fell forward, signalling it's surrender. Harry hopped off the horse he was astride, walking over to Hermione and taking her hand.

"That's it?" She asked. "Not much of a challenge, is it?"

Harry chuckled. "That's one of the easiest manoeuvres to block in chess." He shook his head. "I honestly can't believe McGonagall didn't build a defence against it."

"Maybe she thought it was too simple." Hermione took his hand, and sidled through the mostly-intact white side. "Still... good game, Harry."

He chuckled as they went through the door, only to hit the 'invisible wall'. "Sweet child of mine!" Harry gasped, wincing.

"A t-troll?" Hermione stammered, covering her nose with her mouth.

The troll, the source of the stench in the room, was unconscious, bleeding from a series of wounds on both torso and head.

"Well... whoever came down here before us must have taken it out." Harry said, breathing through his mouth in a futile attempt to block the eye-watering smell. "This one must be from Quirrell. He's the DADA teacher."

"Can we move on?" Hermione asked, tears in her eyes. "I'm gonna pass out from this stench, soon." Without another word, the two progressed on.

The last room contained a table with a series of bottles. "Joy." Harry dead-panned. "Potions."

Hermione picked up the piece of paper, quickly reading the riddle. Harry just watched her, almost seeing the synapses firing. Harry idly picked up a small bottle, as though looking in it.

"That's the one, Harry." Hermione said. "That potion will get you through the flames."

"There's only enough for one." Harry said, looking at her.

"I'll go back... get help." Hermione looked at him, concern and worry prominent on her face. "You're a great wizard, Harry." She said softly.

"Not as good as you." Harry said, smiling softly as he remembered this conversation from the first-time round.

“Me?” Hermione retorted. “Books... cleverness... There’s more important things, Harry. Things like friendship, bravery and...” She trailed off.

“And love.” Harry said, staring straight into her eyes. “You be careful going back, Hermione.”

She lurched towards him, wrapping him in the tightest hug he’d ever experienced, in either life. He felt his body start to react to the presence of a warm, female body pressed against him, and took a small step back, so it wouldn’t be obvious to her. “Be careful going forward, Harry.” She mumbled into his neck. She leaned back, brushing her lips over his cheek. “Good luck.”

Without another word, Hermione grabbed another bottle, drinking the contents, and rushing back to the first door. As she stepped through the flames, she looked over her shoulder to see Harry downing the other bottle, before he squared his shoulders.

Harry stepped through the flames, intent on facing Quirrell alone. He passed through the door, stopping when he saw Quirrell-mort staring at the Mirror of Erised. “You!” He called out, managing to sound surprised.

Quirrell turned round, an evil smile plastered onto his face. “Yes. Me.”

“B-But... I thought Snape...” Harry stammered.

“Yes.” Quirrell’s voice was not longer timid and stuttering. He now exuded a smooth, silky confidence, that made Harry’s skin crawl. “He does seem the type, doesn’t he?”

Harry nodded absently, glancing around the large stone chamber. “Yeah, he does. He seems like the type to torture young children with Legilimency attacks.”

Quirrell’s face dropped slightly, before hardening. He raised his wand, casting a non-verbal ‘Incarcerous’. Harry let the ropes hit him, inwardly rolling his eyes at the predictability of Quirrell, even without his future knowledge.

“Does he?” Quirrell asked, sounding thoroughly uninterested. “Well... he may have been attacking you, Potter, but he certainly kept an eye on me.”

“Did he?” Harry asked, sounding equally bored. “I can’t imagine why. You’re such a useless nobody, you’re barely worth my time, even now.”

Quirrell nodded absently. “Yes... who would suspect p-p-poor s-s-stuttering Professor Q-Q-Quirrell?”

I did, you useless wanker. How you managed to survive for almost a year with Voldemort’s mind in your body, I will never know. “So... why are you after the Philosopher’s Stone?”

“I have my reasons. If it wasn’t for Severus stopping me on Halloween, I’d’ve had it, and been out of here.”

“Halloween?” Harry asked innocently. May as well let him have his moment. He’ll be dead, soon enough.

“Yes, the troll.”

Harry didn’t need to feign his anger at this point. “You mean, you let the troll into school?” Quirrell nodded absently, as he listened to a voice only he could hear. Harry’s voice became colder. “You let the troll into the school, which nearly hurt my Hermione?”

Quirrell looked up, and gave a type-2 Snape Sneer. “A Mudblood? Why should I care about a pitiful little Mudblood?”

Because, I’m going to kill you for her. Harry thought silently. “She is not a Mudblood, Quirrell!” He snapped. “She is a good person. Far better than you, you evil little prick!”

Quirrell laughed, a malevolent sound in the quiet air of the dungeon. “There is no good and evil, Potter. Only power, and those too weak to obtain it.” He waved his wand at Harry, before glancing at the mirror again.

The ropes tightened, but Harry didn't bother to fight it. He knew he'd be able to break them. "Do you really believe that?" He asked, his voice full of innocent curiosity. He'd never had the chance to speak to Quirinus Quirrell before, and was oddly curious as to his views. "Do you really believe there's no such thing as good and evil?"

Quirrell stopped, and for a moment, his eyes cleared, before glazing over slightly, a sure sign of possession. "Yes, I do. There's no such thing as right and wrong, either."

Harry, always up for a philosophical debate, carried on. "I disagree. You're saying that it's perfectly okay to kill someone to gain power?" Quirrell just nodded. "What happens at the end, though? When you've killed everybody else, and you're the ultimate power on the Earth, simply because there's no-one else? What do you do then?"

Quirrell just shrugged. "My master commands, Potter. I obey. Now, you will stand there, while I investigate this mirror." Quirrell turned his back on Harry, checking out the Mirror of Erised intently.

Harry could feel another Legilimency assault on his mental shields, almost laughing as it bounced away.

"I don't understand..." Quirrell muttered. "Is it inside the mirror? Do I need to break it?"

You colossal prat! Harry thought. You really don't understand what you're doing here, do you? You're in, way over your head. He snorted. Ironic, considering Voldemort's actually in your head.

"Use the boy." Another voice sounded.

And there's Tom! Honestly, how did I ever let this little git frighten me...

"Come here, Potter!" Quirrell roared. The ropes binding Harry loosened, allowing him to shake them off. In the original time-line, he'd meekly walked forward to look into the mirror.

“No.” Harry said. “I’ll tell you what. If you decide now to denounce the degenerate wimp that you’re serving, I’ll make sure you survive.”

Quirrell looked taken aback. “Come here!” He snapped. “You will look into this mirror, and tell me where the stone is!”

Harry just shook his head, chuckling at Quirrell.

“Let me speak to him...” The other voice called weakly.

Quirrell looked down. “Master, you are not strong enough.”

He really isn’t. It’s pathetic, really. Harry thought, watching Quirrell change from a powerful villain, into a mewling sycophant, in less than a second. In a sad way, it was quite impressive.

“I have strength enough for this...” Quirrell said nothing, just began to reach up, and unwrap the smelly turban from his head. As more and more of the cloth came off, the stench in the chamber increased.

“Jesus...” Harry muttered, breathing through his mouth.

When the last of the turban was removed, Harry came face-to-face with the killer of his wife and parents. “Voldemort.” Harry said calmly.

“Potter!” The face spat. “See what I have been reduced to...”

Harry just nodded. “Yes.” He replied casually. “You know, that’s never gonna heal if you don’t stop picking at it.”

Voldemort hissed at him. “Where is the stone?”

Harry ignored Voldemort’s face, and looked at Quirrell’s reflection in the mirror. “This is your only chance, Professor Quirrell. If you don’t renounce Voldemort...”

Voldemort just laughed, while Quirrell gulped nervously. “You’re an interesting child, Potter. What sort of man would you be if you just killed us?”

Harry smiled, a death's-head smile. "No second chances." He said firmly. "I'm that sort of a man."

"Kill him!" Voldemort hissed savagely. Quirrell-mort spun round, raising his wand. "Avada Kedavra!" The bolt of green light tore through the air to Harry, who simply ducked as the lethal curse approached.

"Dull, dull, dull." Harry retorted, not drawing his own wand. He suddenly stopped, looking around the room. Quirrell-mort stopped moving, looking at Harry.

"What is wrong with you now, idiot boy!" Voldemort snapped from the back of Quirrell's head.

"Do you hear them?" Harry asked, cocking his head as though listening to something.

"Hear what?" Quirrell asked, looking around the room.

"The drums." Harry said quietly, pulling his wand from his sleeve. He started tapping out a four-note beat, waiting a second, before tapping out the beat again. "Can't you hear them? The constant... drumming..."

Voldemort looked at the reflection in the mirror, seeing Harry stood in the middle of the chamber, tapping out some kind of beat on his wand. "You're insane!"

Harry smiled, giving Voldemort two thumbs up. "Yep. Here! Come! The! Drums!" Using his magic to reinforce his legs, Harry leapt forward, soaring through the air, intent on landing a blow to Quirrell's face. He'd made his choice. Harry had given the man two opportunities to evict Voldemort from his body, and he'd rejected them both. Considering that was two more chances than he normally gave, Harry was feeling pretty unmerciful.

Just as he was about to land a punch, Quirrell ducked out of the way, leaving Harry to twist in mid-air, landing on one knee, his back inches from the mirror. He quickly looked inside, seeing his reflection wink

and drop a stone into his pocket. Harry felt the sharp, lumpy rock fall into his own pocket, before he turned to face Quirrell.

“Ya give up, or are ya thirsty for more?” He snarled, raising his wand.

Volde-Quirrell just laughed, raising his wand, sending three AK’s at Harry. With an impressive display of gymnastics, Harry ducked, rolled and jumped over all three curses, slowly inching his way forward.

“Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!” Harry sang softly, still making his way closer. “Come to death, Tommy-boy!” He suddenly lurched forward, grabbing Quirrell’s hand, letting the blood protection from Lily Potter burn through the skin like a massively intense burst of radiation.

Quirrell screamed, dropping the way, before raising the smoking stump to his eyes. “M-master? What sort of magic is this?”

“Kill the boy!” Voldemort demanded shrilly.

“Aw... does it hurt?” Harry asked. Quirrell looked up, to see Harry stood there, his hands held in front of him, outlined faintly in green. When Quirrell looked into his eyes, he felt a chill down to his very soul. Even Voldemort felt it. There was nothing human in that gaze. It spoke of a rage so intense, planets would burn from it.

Harry’s face was rock hard, showing a cold emotionlessness that made Quirrell’s bowels release automatically. Harry just leaned forward, one of the glowing hands resting on Quirrell’s face, while the other wrapped around the back of his head.

See how you like being touched, Voldemort, you bastard! Harry thought viciously. His scar flared with a migraine worthy of song, if the song was very, very quiet. Harry had felt so much pain in his life that this was just a minor twinge.

The faces he was clutching had started to desiccate, turning to dust underneath his fingers. Quirrell was dead now, only the faint traces of power from Voldemort’s mangled soul holding the corpse together.

Harry kept his grip, waiting until the powder started to drop to the floor. Harry dropped the dried mass, and headed back to the mirror.

So... the boy is not powerless, after all? Voldemort's spirit, the last section of his mauled soul, floated up from the debris of Quirrell's body.

Harry turned, seeing the spirit rise, and decided to let it go. With all of the research he'd done up-time, he could probably have bound the soul fragment to any piece of debris in the chamber, but decided to let him leave... for now.

With a scream, the soul fragment soared forward, plunging itself through Harry's body, before heading for one of the tiny cracks in the ceiling, and freedom.

Harry shivered, as the soul fragment stole away a piece of his magic, enough to get it back to... wherever the hell it was going. His core would regenerate by morning, leaving him whole and healthy. With a sigh, he sat in front of the mirror, keeping his back to it, while he conjured up a deck of playing cards, and began to play 'Patience'.

Dumbledore, followed by McGonagall, Flitwick, Snape and Hermione, tore through the chambers, bypassing each method of protection. He cast an Incendio so hot, it obliterated the Devil's Snare, summoned the summon-proof flying key, blew up the chess set, and breathed through his mouth when going past the troll.

When he entered Snape's Potion/Logic chamber, he cast a flame-freezing charm, before stalking ahead. All five had their wands out, ready for battle.

Dumbledore opened the door, a Stupefy on his lips, when he noticed the desiccated corpse on the floor. He stopped in mid-stride, causing McGonagall to run directly into his back. Gingerly, he stepped into the chamber, followed by the rest. With a squeak, Hermione charged forward towards Harry, who held up his hand.

She looked down, to see Harry with a nearly-complete game of Patience. Two more cards flipped over, allowing Harry to complete the game. He stood up and grabbed Hermione in a fierce hug.

"Harry, you did it!" She squealed softly.

Harry nodded, and mumbled something into her bushy hair. He wouldn't repeat it to her face, and no-one else had heard it. I love you, Hermione.

Dumbledore cleared his throat after thirty seconds of being ignored. Hermione squeaked again and pulled back, blushing furiously.

"Good evening, Professor Dumbledore, sir." Harry said politely. "You're looking well. I assume, from your presence, that your business at the Ministry was completed successfully?"

Dumbledore was stunned that little eleven-year old Harry Potter was sounding so calm, after facing what had obviously been a very stressful evening. "Uh... yes, Harry. It was. Are you... okay?"

Harry just grinned. "I'm fine, sir. Had a very enlightening evening, myself, sir."

Snape snarled softly. "What in the name of Merlin happened here, Potter!"

Pointedly ignoring the arrogant burke, Harry looked at Dumbledore. "Was there anything else, sir?"

"Professor Snape asked a question, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore said, eyeing Snape warily. "It may have been a little ruder than I would have asked it," there was a warning in the voice that even the thickest man on the planet couldn't have missed, "but it is still valid. What happened?"

Harry just shrugged, keeping one arm around Hermione's waist. She unconsciously leaned backwards, resting herself against him. "Well, sir, Professor Quirrell thought it'd be a marvellous time to steal Nicholas Flamel's Philosopher's Stone. Naturally, sir, I disagreed."

"And?" Snape demanded petulantly.

"We had a bit of a barney, sir." Harry said, not taking his eyes off Dumbledore.

“Professor Quirrell?” McGonagall said, her Scottish brogue becoming thicker. “Where is he?”

Harry pointed at the pile of black dust and clothing. “That would be what’s left of him. Seems his body couldn’t handle Voldemort being stuck in the back of his head.”

“Do you think we could go up to my office, and discuss this in more detail, Mr. Potter?” Flitwick asked calmly.

“Certainly, sir.”

Flitwick’s office amused Harry. Half of it was in half-scale, in relation to Flitwick’s diminutive stature, while the other half was in conventional size. The group settled down, the teachers on one side of the desk, while Harry and Hermione shared a seat on the other.

“So, what happened, Mr. Potter?” Flitwick asked softly.

“Basically, sir,” Harry began, idly conjuring a tray of Hot Chocolate, which he offered to Hermione, then pushed the tray forward to the teachers. “myself and Hermione found out that Flamel’s stone was being protected inside the school. We found out that Professor Dumbledore had left the premises, and deduced that it was the perfect time for someone to go after the stone.

“We went up to the third floor corridor, sang to Fluffy...” Harry looked up at Dumbledore. “Do you think we could get Hagrid to rename him, sir? I mean, a twelve-foot Cerberus called ‘Fluffy’ is a bit much, don’t you think?” He shrugged, and carried on. “We passed Fluffy,” pause for snigger, “jumped down the trap door, and landed on Professor Sprout’s Devil’s Snare. Set fire to it, flew on the broom to get the key, and may I say, Professor Flitwick, that was an evil little key?”

Flitwick just grinned.

“Anyway, went on to Professor McGonagall’s giant chess set,” Harry winked at her. “beat it in four moves,” McGonagall started sputtering, “went past Professor Quirrell’s troll, which was already unconscious, and got to the final challenge, Snape’s potions.”

Snape sneered.

“Hermione figured out which bottle was the anti-Flame potion, but there was only enough for one. She took the other potion, and came back up to find some help, while I went on ahead.”

I will not tell you that she kissed me, and that I was nursing a semi when I went through that door. Harry thought to himself. “I got into the final chamber to see Professor Quirrell looking at the Mirror of Erised.” Harry smirked at Dumbledore. “Nice challenge, by the way, sir. Took me almost ten seconds to figure it out.”

Dumbledore pouted for a moment, before marshalling his face, and starting his eyes to twinkle. “Ten seconds, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And what was the challenge?” Dumbledore asked, raising his brow to his hairline.

“Well, Professor Quirrell wanted to give the stone to someone. I just wanted to make sure the stone was safe, but I didn’t want to use. Logic suggests that there was an enchantment on the mirror, making it so that only someone who wanted to find the stone, find it, but not use it, would be able to retrieve it.” Harry smiled winningly at Dumbledore.

“Hmm.” Dumbledore was devastated. “Ten seconds?”

“About that, sir.” Harry said. An elbow to his side brought his grin under control. “So, Quirrell took his turban off, which reeked, by the way, to show that he had another face, on the back of his head.”

McGonagall made an odd gasping sound, which she quickly smothered.

“The head identified itself as Voldemort...” Harry suddenly looked up. “Was he always that ugly, sir?” He asked innocently. “Cause, he had a face which only a mother could love.”

Flitwick and McGonagall snickered, Snape rolled his eyes, and Dumbledore twinkled.

“Even then, I bet they had to hang a lamb chop around his neck so the dog would play with him. Anyway, we had a verbal joust, which he lost, then he attacked me, shot four AKs at me, all missed, then grabbed me. His hand started to burn, so I grabbed his head until he turned into dust.”

There was a few seconds of absolute silence. Harry could hear the ticking of a watch, and took a quiet slurp of his hot chocolate. Everyone seemed to be a little flabbergasted, except for Harry, who just sat calmly, drinking his chocolate.

“You’ve had a busy evening, Mr. Potter.” Flitwick said.

“Yes, sir.” Harry replied. “I’m a bit tired, as well.”

“I do believe a good night’s sleep will do wonders for you, Mr. Potter.” Dumbledore said, taking control of the meeting. “Perhaps a visit to the Hospital Wing may be in order?”

“Are you feeling unwell, sir?” Harry asked innocently. “You should be careful, sir. At your age-” Harry was interrupted for another shot to his ribs from Hermione. He yelped, before glaring at her for a moment. “No, thank you, sir. I’ll be fine. With your permission?”

Dumbledore just nodded, as Harry stood up, taking Hermione’s hand in his. As they walked out of the door, Dumbledore could hear Harry’s indignant protests. “Was it necessary to keep hitting me in the ribs, woman?”

Dumbledore was about to say something to Flitwick, when a small item flew through the open doorway. Without thinking, Dumbledore caught it, and took a look. It was the Philosopher’s Stone.

Harry ran back to Hermione, who was waiting further down the hallway with a small scowl on her face. “You could have just handed that to him, Harry.” She mock-scolded.

“Where’s the fun in that?” He asked her, wrapping his arm around her waist. They carried on towards the Ravenclaw common room.

“So, what was that ‘verbal joust’ you had?” Hermione asked, reaching down and taking hold of Harry’s hand.

“Huh?” Harry looked over. “Oh, after he called you a Mudblood,” Harry hissed for a moment, “I told him that you were a good person.” He stopped, causing her to stop as well. “It was Quirrell who let the troll in at Halloween, you know?”

She shook her head. “It’s his fault I almost died...” She whispered to herself.

“Well, he won’t be doing it again, Hermione.” Harry said, wrapping her in a tight hug. “I’ll always be there to protect you.”

“I’ll hold you to that, Harry.” She whispered, squeezing him back, before pulling away, and grabbing hold of his hand again. “So, you were saying?”

“Hmm? Oh, yeah. I told him that you’re a good person, and he said ‘there’s no such thing as good and evil. There’s only power, and those too weak to obtain it’.”

“That’s bollocks, Harry.” Hermione said primly.

“I know that.” Harry replied calmly. “I told him there’s good and evil, and right and wrong. He disagreed. After that, he attacked me. Which means he couldn’t come up with a retort. Ergo, I won.”

Hermione just laughed softly, before opening the portrait hole. Once back in the empty common room, the two stopped in front of the fire. Hermione just stared at Harry, while he stared back.

“So...” she said, not sure where to go from here.

“So...” Harry replied. He reached up one hand slowly, resting it against her cheek, while he stroked under her eye gently with his thumb. “Been a pretty eventful evening... wouldn’t you say?”

Hermione leaned forward slightly, feeling the pressure of Harry's hand on her cheek increase. "Y-Yes..." She breathed. "Hell of a night." What the hell is he doing to me? She thought. Harry's thumb was sending sensations all over her face and neck. Her eyes fluttered closed.

"You know... we should probably head up to bed." Harry said, smiling gently at her.

Hermione's eyes shot open, looking at him incredulously. "Harry..."

"Our own beds, Hermione." He replied, looking very amused as the conclusion she'd leapt to.

He leaned close, pressing a kiss against her forehead, before stepping back. "Sweet dreams, sweet Hermione." He vanished up the stairs, looking back.

She reached up and touched the top of her forehead, feeling her skin tingle from his kiss. "Goodnight, sweet prince." She whispered, before heading up her own stairs.

Hermione woke the following morning, feeling exhausted. She'd spent a good portion of the night pondering what had happened with Harry the night before. He'd told her that she was the best friend he could ever hope for, and wanted her to be his girlfriend. Even though she was only twelve, she knew that he would be an exceptional boyfriend. She couldn't wait to see him today. She showered, manhandled her hair into something resembling control, dressed, and dashed downstairs.

She looked around the common room for Harry, but couldn't see him. She glanced at the stairs, noticing Terry Boot making his way down. She didn't think much of Boot. Yeah, he was clever, as almost all Ravenclaws were, but he was so deathly dull. "Morning, Terry." She said cheerfully.

Boot looked startled. "Er... morning, Granger."

"Have you seen Harry this morning?" She asked.

"No. Heard him, though. He was up at the crack of bloody dawn. Showered and bugged off, letting the rest of us go back to sleep."

"Oh. Thanks, Terry." Hermione said, turning away from him. She plopped onto the couch, grabbing a book off the coffee table. Terry just shrugged, and headed for the portrait hole. It opened, revealing the last person Boot would have expected to be there.

"Good morning, Headmaster." He said respectfully.

"Good morning, Mr. Boot." Dumbledore replied, stepping aside so Terry could leave. The terrified first year scurried away, leaving Dumbledore chuckling, before heading over to Hermione.

"Have you seen Mr. Potter, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked.

Hermione looked up from her reading, to see the Headmaster stood just inside the portrait hole. "Not since yesterday, sir." She replied politely. "I was thinking about going and finding him for a spot of lunch."

Flitwick made his way into the common room, needing to speak with one of the prefects. He stopped when he saw the Headmaster inside his house. "Albus? Is everything all right?"

"Fine, Filius." Dumbledore replied. "I was just needing to speak to young Mr. Potter about his summer arrangements."

Hermione's face pursed slightly when she heard this. She still remembered the 'confrontation' from last Christmas, where Dumbledore had had Filch try and stop Harry from leaving the castle. Taking a deep breath, she spoke up. "Why do you need to speak to Harry about his summer plans, sir?"

Dumbledore turned to face the girl, slightly shocked to hear her question him like that. From what he'd heard from the other members of staff, she was almost worshipful of authority figures (with the exception of Professor Snape, which Dumbledore could understand, but would never admit to), and her questioning was... almost

rebellious. "That's something that I need to speak to Mr. Potter about, Miss Granger."

"I'll come with you, if you don't mind, Headmaster." Hermione said firmly, putting her book onto the table. She stood. "I'm interested in his answer myself."

Oh? Dumbledore tried not to look puzzled. Why is it of interest to her? "That's not necessary, Miss Granger." I don't need your interference. "I just need a quick conversation to tell him where he's going for the summer."

'Tell him' where he's going for the summer? Hermione pondered. Not 'ask him', but 'tell him'? That'll go down like a ton of bricks. "Well, sir, considering my family is thinking of asking him to join us on our holiday, I think it's something that I should be involved with."

Dumbledore smiled disarmingly. "That certainly won't be possible, Miss Granger. I have arranged for Harry to return to his relatives for the whole summer. He won't be able to leave them until it's time to return to Hogwarts in September."

Hermione just stared for a moment. "I haven't yet brought this up with Harry, Headmaster. Shouldn't he know about his options before making a decision?"

"I have already made the decision for Mr. Potter." Dumbledore said absently, before looking at Hermione's face, and realising that she didn't look as accepting as he'd hoped. "Mr. Potter needs to be isolated from the Wizarding world when he's not at Hogwarts." He played his trump card. "It's for his own safety, Miss Granger. As his friend, I'm sure you support that."

Hermione smiled politely. "I do support Harry's safety, Headmaster." Too much, sometimes. "That's why his home, protected under a charm, can't be found by anyone who hasn't been told by Harry himself. That must be safer than staying with his family."

“The Fidelius charm can be breached, Miss Granger.” Dumbledore said patronisingly. “You must be aware of that, from Mr. Potter’s personal history.”

Ooh, low blow. Hermione thought viciously. They picked the wrong person to protect their home. Harry doing it himself negates that possibility. “I can understand that no protection is perfect, Headmaster.” She replied diplomatically.

“And as Mr. Potter’s magical guardian,” Dumbledore decided to gloss over the fact that Harry, as an emancipated minor, had no need of a magical guardian, “I’ve already determined where he should spend the holiday.”

Hermione grinned. “Well, then, sir, let’s go and find Lord Potter to discuss this with him.”

Dumbledore waited until she had gone past, before he realised what she had said. ‘Lord’ Potter? She knows about his emancipation... This could be a problem.

The small group of Hermione, Dumbledore and Flitwick had checked most of the places where Harry hung out. Since that was really only the Great Hall, the Quidditch pitch and the library, it was a fairly short search. Dumbledore, getting annoyed with wandering around Hogwarts, had summoned one of the House Elves to help find Harry.

It took Trippy, the Head Elf, approximately forty-seven seconds to locate Harry in the cavernous Hogwarts. “Mr. Harry Potter, sir, is being in the Come and Go room, Heads Dumblydoor, sir.”

“The Come and Go room?” Hermione asked. “What’s that?”

Trippy looked up. “A room that remakes itself when needed, Miss.” He replied, looking down, embarrassed to be speaking to a student. “Its be on the seven floor.”

Hermione nodded absently, already heading for the main stairs, Flitwick and Dumbledore falling in behind her.

Harry had made his way to the Room of Requirement, feeling the need to work off some stress after the oddly anti-climactic fight with Voldemort.

He paced outside the statue of Barnabas the Barmy three times, visualising his desire. To his glee, the door that appeared was not the conventional wooden door, but a six-sided portal, with two uneven doors in the middle of it. They slid open smoothly, the sound of the servos controlling them oddly loud in the corridor.

He entered the room, noting the black panelling on the wall, with a series of yellow gridlines evenly spaced on the walls.

Hogwarts... I will never question your powers again. He thought, heading to an archway on the inside of the door.

“Room, reconfigure for combat simulation.” The room shifted around him, forming into a small grassy field, a high fence around it. Six Death Eaters appeared in front of him, standing motionless until Harry began the scenario. Harry jabbed a few more buttons on the arch, conjuring up a sword for himself. Instead of the Sword of Gryffindor, a weapon he was entitled to by right, he conjured a straight-bladed katana, midnight black blade and pommel.

His clothes changed from standard school robes to loose black pants and an open shirt. A pair of tight tabi boots replaced his shoes, leaving him free to move.

“Room, begin simulation!” The instant the last syllable left his lips, the Death Eaters began to move, throwing curses at Harry.

Without thinking, Harry dropped into a defensive stances, almost a century of magical and physical combat training coming to the forefront of his mind. He rolled to the side, avoiding a green curse that smacked into the floor behind him. He carried on the roll, allowing the momentum to pull him back to his feet. Another curse snaked towards him, this one the sickly yellow of the Cruciatus. Harry batted it away with the sword, before pulling his wand from his belt. “Stupefy!” The red bolt slammed into the Death Eater, throwing him twenty feet back, hitting his head hard on the floor.

Harry spun, dodging another Cruciatus, before slashing wildly with the blade. The Death Eater never stood a chance as he was eviscerated on the spot. Harry added a leg sweep, taking the man down permanently. That left four, and Harry had yet to be hit.

Part of his mind noted that the doors had opened, and people had made their way into the room. He ignored them as the other four fired a barrage of AKs at him. With unnatural grace, Harry leapt into the air, somersaulting over all four curses, before he fired a barrage of stunners. They crackled against the Death Eaters' shield, only one breaking through. Harry quickly fired a series of blasting curses to cover him as he moved over to the newly-fallen man. A quick jab with the sword made sure the man would never rise again. Harry ducked as one Death Eater fired a Reducto directly at him, shattering the sword.

Throwing down the now-useless pommel, Harry rolled to the side, firing a spell-chain of four Reductos, a Stupefy and an Incarcerous. As expected, all six spells hit, throwing the Death Eater down with multiple fractures, unconscious and bound securely. That left two, with Harry still untouched.

Another sickly-yellow beam flew at Harry, this one catching him in the middle of his back. With a muffled cry of pain, he turned, throwing his wand in the way of the beam, breaking the Cruciatus. He panted for a moment, gathering his strength before throwing back a few cutting curses, giving himself a moment to rest.

A second later, he went back on the offensive, throwing stunners, cutting curses and Reductos at his remaining two assailants. The spell-chains he was throwing battered the two men mercilessly, until they collapsed into blissful unconsciousness.

"Scenario complete." A voice called out. Harry turned to face the newcomers, seeing the look of shock on Hermione and Dumbledore's faces, and a look of respect on Flitwick's.

"Good morning, Professors." He said, turning to Hermione. "Morning, sweet."

"An impressive duel, Mr. Potter." Flitwick said. "What were the spells?"

"Standard Death Eater combat tactics, sir." Harry replied. "The usual nasties."

"Including the Killing and torture curses?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yep." Harry replied.

"And what if these curses hit you?" Dumbledore asked.

"Well... to be honest, sir, I don't really wanna find out." Harry replied. "I know that the Cruciatus hurts, and I don't wanna be hit by the AK again."

"This is dangerous, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore chided. "You are playing with your life."

"No, I'm not." Harry retorted. "I'm playing a training scenario. There's safety protocols in place. It won't kill me."

"We will continue this discussion at another time, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore said. "At the moment, I need to discuss your summer arrangements. Please come with me to my office."

Hermione cleared her throat. "Sir, before you do, I need-"

"Miss Granger." Dumbledore interrupted. "I have had this discussion with you." He turned to Harry. "Please come with me now."

"Harry, I really must insist that you return to the Dursleys this summer." Dumbledore began, smiling benignly in his usual 'grandfatherly' way. The two had left Flitwick and Hermione behind on the fifth floor, near the Ravenclaw common room, and continued on to Dumbledore's office.

"Why, Headmaster?" Harry asked, absently looking at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore looked elated. This is far better than last Christmas. He thought to himself. Back then, Harry had refused outright. Maybe coming face-to-face with Lord Voldemort has made him more aware of the danger. "Your recent encounter with Lord Voldemort has certainly brought you to his attention, Harry. His second defeat at your hands will make him more eager to attack you. The protections offered at Privet Drive cannot be breached by Voldemort."

"Really?" Harry asked. He already knew about the Blood Wards from his first pass through time.

This is going much better than I expected. Dumbledore smiled winningly. "Yes, Harry. As long as you reside in a place where your mother's blood lives, you cannot be harmed by Voldemort or his followers." His smile grew even larger. "So, I shall update the school records to indicate that you have gone back to the Dursleys?"

Harry chuckled. "I think not, Headmaster."

"What?" Dumbledore looked astonished. Someone had dared to refuse him? "Why not, Harry? They're the last of your family. You should reach out to them."

"Ha!" Harry spat. "They've done enough 'reaching out' to me, Headmaster. Usually, though, they had a weapon in hand when they did it. While your blood protections may stop Voldemort or his Death Eaters from attacking Privet Drive, it does nothing to stop Vernon, Petunia and Dudley attacking me. And frankly, I'm not prepared to accept nearly ten weeks of beatings just to keep them safe for another year."

"Harry, I'm sure you exaggerate the situation. They're your family." Dumbledore tried switching tacks, going for the 'sympathy/family' angle.

"No, sir. They're my relatives." Harry replied. "They have made it very plain to me, during the ten years that I was locked there, that they do not consider me a part of their family, and I have no intention of ever claiming them as my family."

Dumbledore sighed. Why do children always have to make things difficult? Can't he see that I know what I'm doing? "Harry, I really must insist."

"You can 'insist' all you want, Headmaster." Harry replied firmly. "Unless you can give me a valid reason, I must decline."

Dumbledore sighed, before leaning back in his chair, and taking a comfort suck on a lemon drop. "Very well, Harry. I will explain. Shortly after Voldemort was banished, I left you at your relatives house, invoking the same kind of ancient magic that your mother used to protect you."

A lie. Harry thought, listening to Dumbledore with half an ear, while wondering what the old man was planning. Mum didn't use any magic to protect me. It was the sacrifice, combined with Trelawney's bloody prophecy, that saved me that night.

Dumbledore, unaware of Harry's thoughts, continued with his lecture. "This type of protection requires that you live in the same house as your mother's blood, in this case, your Aunt Petunia, and in a lesser respect, your cousin Dudley."

Harry nodded. "Blood wards. You're talking about Blood Wards, aren't you?"

"Yes." Dumbledore nodded.

"An ancient, powerful, and if memory serves, an extremely illegal piece of magic, Headmaster." Harry replied, smiling slightly. "Doesn't the Ministry consider any blood magic as dark and dangerous?"

Dumbledore just waved it away. "It was for the greater good, Harry."

Ah, there's that bloody phrase. Harry would have sniggered if he wasn't in front of the Headmaster. I wonder just how many crimes and atrocities have been committed because of the 'greater good'.

"So, while you remain at Privet Drive with your maternal Aunt, no wizard who means you harm will be able to find you. They would walk

right past the property, without being able to find you.” Dumbledore smiled again. “So, you see, returning to Privet Drive would be best for you, all right?”

Harry shook his head. “No, Headmaster. You’ve still not given me a suitable answer. While the illegal Blood Wards will stop a Dark wizard from harming me while I’m there, in effect, protecting me from enemies outside, they do nothing to protect me from threats inside.”

“I’m sure your family means you no harm, Harry.” Dumbledore said dismissively. “As your family, they love you very much.”

“You’re wrong, Headmaster.” Harry replied coolly. “But, let’s shelve the topic of my relatives for the moment, since we’ll never agree. There’s another fact that I believe to me far more important.”

“Oh?” Dumbledore’s tone had cooled considerably. “And what would that be?”

“Sacrificial blood wards require an emotional context. I assume, since this was based on my mother’s sacrifice, a love-based emotion, that the Blood Wards require love in order to empower them.”

“Exactly, Harry.” Dumbledore said, convinced that Harry was actually going to back up his argument. “As I’m sure you’re aware, the Wards have been present for the last ten years.”

“And they wouldn’t stop a determined Kneazle from attacking.” Harry retorted. “There is no love between me and my relatives. The wards, while present, are no defence. My Aunt hates me with a fiery passion, one I’m pleased to report I return just as vehemently.”

Dumbledore’s tone grew colder. “Harry, you must return to Privet Drive. Without your presence, the Blood Wards will fail, leaving your family open to an attack. As the Head of the Wizengamot, I must insist that you return to Privet Drive for the summer, so that your relatives will be protected.”

Harry’s brow raised. Well... that ups the stakes quite a bit. I really didn’t think he’d go this far. “Sir, I am an emancipated minor. Even as

the Head of the Wizengamot, you do not have the authority to order me to go anywhere.”

Blast this child! Why will he not simply do as he is told? This is for his own good. “Harry, this sort of rebellious nature shows why you should not have been emancipated. I am far older and far wiser, and I know what must be done.”

Older, yes. Wiser? I wonder... “Sir, you’ve gone from having a friendly chat with me, to threatening me. Do you really believe this to be the best course of action?”

“Mr. Potter. I ask that you consider the greater good. By not returning to Privet Drive, you run the risk of your family being attacked by Dark wizards. Do you really want that on your conscience? Would you be able to live with yourself being the reason that they are killed?” Dumbledore looked at Harry disappointedly.

This is fucking priceless. Harry thought. Behind his Occlumency shields, Harry was rolling on the floor laughing, barely able to contain himself. Does he really think that playing to my guilt will work? Delusional old git. “Sir, attempting to play to my sympathies with regards to the Dursleys will not work. Because I have none. If the Dursleys are killed by Dark wizards, I will not laugh or cry. It will simply be a report in the newspaper to me. I would not shed tears for monsters killing weaker monsters.”

Dumbledore sagged slightly in his chair. “Harry... what have I done to make you distrust me so much? Can’t you see that I am working for the greater good, here?”

Harry reached into his pocket, pulling out a liquorice wand. He unwrapped it, and started sucking. “I fail to understand, Headmaster, how my returning to my relatives’ house for the summer will have an impact on the greater good. Perhaps you could explain to me.”

“It’s not something you’re ready to hear, Harry.” Dumbledore replied, slightly patronisingly. “When you’re older, I’ll be able to explain. For now, I simply must insist.”

"In that case, sir, I simply must refuse. Besides, I have things that I need to do this summer, and going back to Privet Drive would only hinder them." Harry tried to look apologetic, but failed.

"Oh? And what do you have to do this summer, Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore replied, his tone sinking back to cold formality.

How the hell is this any of your business? Harry fumed silently. Ah, you want to know so that if it's something you disapprove of, you'll be able to stop me. "Firstly, sir, I need to go to Gringotts, and find out about my parents' will. It completely slipped my mind last summer."

At this, Dumbledore broke out into a slightly nervous sweat. "Why is that necessary, Harry?" He asked.

Harry looked at Dumbledore incredulously. "I've never known my parents. This is a way of connecting to them, Headmaster." He shook his head. "Secondly, I've got some magical research to do, and being locked into the cupboard under the stairs at Privet Drive would make that far more difficult."

Dumbledore clicked reprovingly. "Harry, you are aware that students are forbidden from practicing magic over the summer. The Decree for Underage Sorcery applies to all under-seventeen students."

"And as an emancipated minor, I'm exempt from that regulation, Headmaster. As long as I stick to the Statute of Secrecy, I'm fine." Let me guess, Albus... you don't want me learning too much. It ruins the plans for your little weapon if he becomes knowledgeable and powerful. If you only knew the truth...

"Harry, even though you are a celebrity in the Wizarding world, you cannot simply go around flaunting the laws. As Head of the Wizengamot, I do have the authority to take you into protective custody, especially if you are announcing that you plan to break the law." If he is going to be this troublesome, I will simply have to keep him sequestered at Hogwarts for the summer. Dumbledore didn't want to do this. "Besides, you should be spending your summers

enjoying yourself. There's plenty of time to learn while school is in session."

I can't believe this. Harry's tone was cold and hard. "I'll be leaving now, Headmaster. I will return to my home, not the Dursleys, and take a good, long think about returning to Hogwarts in September. I will not attend a school where the Headmaster feels he was the right to threaten a student, simply because he doesn't get his own way." Harry stood. "Good day."

What? What just happened? Dumbledore asked himself. "I'm not threatening you, Harry." He said placatingly. "I simply wish for you to understand the consequences of your actions, and the damage that you could cause."

Harry walked over to the door. "No, sir. You were threatening to lock me away in this castle, simply because I won't bend over and give you what you want." He shook his head sadly. "Imagine the newspapers, sir. What'll happen when the story gets out that the 'Boy-Who-Lived' withdraws from Hogwarts because of the manipulations of its Headmaster?"

He can't withdraw! Dumbledore thought in a panic. Time to play the parent card. "Harry, you know your parents wanted you to attend and graduate Hogwarts."

To Dumbledore's horror, Harry just shrugged. "If you say so, Headmaster. I, personally, don't know anything of the sort." He opened the door. "I'll let you know what I decide." With those final words, Harry was gone.

"Damn!" Dumbledore spat, slumping into his chair. How did this go wrong? Why wouldn't he just do as he was told? How do I fix this? Dumbledore had called both Professors McGonagall and Flitwick to his office just after Harry left. The two had responded quickly, making their way to Dumbledore's office.

"Is there a problem, Albus?" McGonagall had asked as soon as they were settled.

“In a word, Minerva, yes.” Dumbledore replied. “I asked Mr. Potter to return to his relatives for the summer months. He refused. I need you to convince him to go back.”

“Why?” Flitwick asked.

“There are special wards available at the Dursley house that will ensure Mr. Potter is protected. These wards can only be situated in the place where his mother’s blood lives. These wards will be able to protect him completely from Voldemort.”

“And did you explain this to him?” McGonagall asked.

“I did.” Dumbledore said. “However, in a fit of childish rebelliousness, he has refused to return.”

“Albus,” Flitwick said slowly, “out of all the words I could use to describe Mr. Potter, ‘childish’ is not one of them.”

“I agree.” Added McGonagall. “He’s the most mature and responsible eleven year old I’ve ever met.” She paused for a moment. “Did he say why he refused to return?”

“He made vague comments about not being happy there.” Dumbledore replied, not meeting either of the gazes. Instead, he was pretending to read some paperwork. “However, his safety is more important than his happiness.”

Flitwick glanced at McGonagall, who nodded near-imperceptibly. “We’ll have a word with him.” Flitwick offered.

It didn’t take long to track Harry down. He was back in the Ravenclaw common room, having a quiet conversation with Hermione.

“Ah, Mr. Potter.” McGonagall said. “Might we have a word?” She glanced at Hermione. “In private?”

Hermione started to stand up, only to be pulled back down by Harry. “You may have a word, Professor, but not in private. Anything that you have to say to me may be said in front of Hermione.”

“This will be a private conversation, Mr. Potter.” McGonagall said firmly.

“Very well.” Harry said, still not releasing Hermione’s hand. “What school-related subject do you wish to discuss with me?”

“It’s not a school subject, Mr. Potter.” McGonagall said, becoming slightly annoyed at Potter’s resistance. “However, it is-” She was cut off as Flitwick stood up on his tiptoes to place his hand on McGonagall’s arm.

“Mr. Potter-”

“Harry.” Harry interrupted. “If it’s not school-related, please call me Harry.”

“Very well.” Flitwick said. “Harry, Headmaster Dumbledore has asked us to have a discussion with you about your summer arrangements.”

“Did he?” Harry said, amused. “I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall in that conversation.”

“Indeed.” Flitwick replied dryly. “He told us that you refused to return to your relatives in... what did he say? Ah, yes, a ‘fit of childish rebelliousness’.”

“Really?” Harry chuckled. “That’s nice. Good to see his honest opinion of me.” He looked at the two teachers. “And do you believe him?”

“No.” The two said together. McGonagall carried on. “You are very mature... Harry. Besides, I don’t like getting involved in a dispute of this kind with both sides of the story. I’d like to hear your side before I take a stand.”

“Very well.” Harry said, squeezing Hermione’s hand as he stood up. “Shall we take a walk?”

Harry led the quartet into the hospital wing, the dreaded domain of Poppy Pomfrey. He shrank back as he heard her bustling about, presumably making sure her stocks were up to date.

“Poppy?” Flitwick called out.

“Filius?” Poppy’s head appeared in the doorway to her office. “Is there something wrong?”

“We’re not sure.” Flitwick said. “The headmaster has asked us to ensure that Mr. Potter returns to his relatives’ home. Mr. Potter brought us here. It’s his show.”

Harry smiled at the matron. “Madame, would you run a medi-scan on me, please?”

Poppy was stunned. The odds that one of the students would voluntarily subject themselves to her tender mercies was astronomically high. She pulled her wand, waving it over Harry. It took a few moments for the initial results to come back.

“Hmm... Mr. Potter... are you sure you wish me to discuss this in front of other people?”

“I have nothing to hide.” Harry replied, before looking at Hermione. “You might find this... distasteful.”

She squeezed his hand. “You’re my friend, Harry.” She said shyly. “I want to be here for you.”

Poppy nodded. “First of all, you’ve suffered from severe malnutrition, virtually all your life.”

“I know. Only in the last ten months or so have I been receiving a proper diet.” Harry replied, sounding completely unaffected. “I was fed only the necessary amount to stay alive by the Dursleys.” He snorted. “Irony, considering I was always the one who cooked it for them.”

Poppy just nodded, waving her wand at a quill on the desk. It leapt into action, transcribing the conversation. “There’s also a number of breaks and fractures in your skeleton. Were you involved in some kind of impact accident?”

Hermione sniffed, reaching up with her free hand to wipe away a tear. McGonagall looked a little misty-eyed too, while Flitwick's face had dropped into an impassive mask.

"List the breaks," Harry said, "and I'll tell you where they came from and why."

Poppy looked aghast. "Fractured skull."

"Uh... Petunia Dursley, November 15th, 1987. Hit by a hot frying pan. I was late with serving them breakfast."

"Broken left radius."

"Dudley. Fireplace poker. September 5th, 1986. I got better marks on a spelling test."

"It healed quite poorly." Poppy noted, making sure the quill was still recording the conversation.

"Not surprising." Harry replied, smiling grimly. "I had to rebreak it twice 'cause it wasn't healing properly."

"But... if it was in a cast, why would you need to rebreak it?" Hermione asked, the tears evident in her voice.

"Who said it was in a cast?" Harry asked. "The Dursleys refused to take me to hospital. They said a freak like me didn't deserve to have it set. They left me in my cupboard until it was healed."

"Fractured right wrist." Poppy said, her voice becoming a monotone, if only to make sure she didn't start crying herself.

"That one was Vernon. He hit it with the car door. August 18th, 1989. It wasn't clean enough for him."

"Compound fracture of your right femur."

“Oh, yeah... that one bloody hurt.” Harry said. “That was Vernon and Dudley tag-teaming me. They threw me down stairs.” He chuckled mirthlessly. “Then they beat me for cracking the plaster at the bottom of the stairs. April 1st, 1991.”

“They’re animals!” Poppy hissed.

“Keep going.” Harry said. “There’s still more.”

“The right hand side of your ribcage.” Poppy said.

“Ah, Dudley’s experience with cricket.” Harry replied. “He wasn’t very good at it, so he found a new use for the bat. That was January 29th, 1990.”

Poppy waited until the quill had moved on to a new piece of parchment. “There’s a few other minor fractures.”

“Just general beatings.” Harry replied dismissively. “Shall we start with soft tissues now?”

Pomfrey was a little shocked that Harry could talk about child abuse with such calm. She was about ready to go and murder the Dursleys. “There’s a lot of damage on your leg.”

Harry just reached down and pulled up his trouser leg, showing a series of puncture wounds and a thick, ropey scar on his calf. “That was Ripper. My aunt Marge’s bulldog. Little git liked to chase me as a child.”

“How was it treated?” Flitwick asked, his voice still cool and calm.

“Uh... I had to rip a t-shirt into bandages and use disinfectant on them.” He looked down at his leg. “I thought I did a good job on it, myself.”

“How old were you?” McGonagall asked, aghast.

“Eight.” He looked up at Pomfrey. “Not bad for a kid, huh?”

“Mr. Potter...” Pomfrey really didn’t know what to say. “I-I’m sorry...”

Harry just waved his hand. “Don’t be. It’s all in the past.” He smiled at her. “It’s not as though there’s anything you could have done, Madam.”

“I could have.” McGonagall whispered, her face turning white. “I was there when Albus dropped you off in ’81.” She looked at Harry, with tears in her eyes. “Harry, I’m so sorry, I didn’t-”

“Stop.” Harry commanded firmly. “I don’t blame you, Professor. I don’t even blame Headmaster Dumbledore. However, I will not go back.”

McGonagall nodded firmly, closely followed by Flitwick, Pomfrey and Hermione. “Never!” Hermione promised.

“There’s a lot of epidermal scarring on your back.” Pomfrey said, carrying on with her exam.

“Ah.” Harry said, suddenly looking nervous. “Yeah... shit. Uh... we don’t really need to discuss that.”

“Share.” Hermione commanded.

Harry shook his hand free from Hermione’s, and started to unbutton his shirt. Hermione felt her heart accelerate as she saw his chest. Even though he’d been neglected and abused for ten years, his chest showed definite muscles. Whatever regime he followed while at school, it was going him good. She looked closer, noticing random small scars on his chest, shoulders and upper arms.

He pulled the shirt off, and crossed his arms, pulling his shoulders forward. “You might wanna brace yourselves.” He warned.

Poppy looked confused, before she realised that Harry was warning them all about some tremendous damage. She watched him turn around, and gasped in absolute horror.

Across Harry's back was a criss-cross of scars, most of them almost a half-inch thick. There were too many to count, going from shoulder blade to kidney. "H-How... how did you get these?" Poppy asked.

Hermione had vanished, presumably rushing to the toilets to void her breakfast. McGonagall had turned absolutely white, the only colour on her face was her eyebrows. Flitwick snarled, before struggling his face back to impassiveness.

"'Uncle' Vernon tied me to the stair banister." Harry reported distantly. "He then removed his belt, and proceeded to whip me, hoping to beat the 'unnaturalness' out of me." He turned to McGonagall. "My aunt and cousin watched. After they cut me down and threw me into my cupboard, Petunia and Vernon went into their bedroom. That was July 31st, 1990. My tenth birthday present."

"Wha... what about the doctors?" Pomfrey asked. "They should have been able to do something to reduce the scarring."

"I didn't see a doctor for these either." Harry replied. "I had to use undiluted bleach to keep them clean while they healed over." He winced as he remembered the pain. "Stings like a bitch, too."

"You are not going back there!" Flitwick snarled. "If necessary, I'll resign from school and become your guardian myself!"

"Seconded." McGonagall added. "Why haven't you told Albus about this?"

"I don't think it's that important to him." Harry replied. "The blood wards, under certain circumstances, would be the ultimate protection. However, they're next to useless, since my relatives hate me, and I hate them. Without the emotional love and support, the wards are useless."

"Well, he'll bloody well find out now!" Pomfrey snarled. "If he sends you back, he'll have my resignation. Children should never be exposed to such abuse!"

Harry suddenly looked up. "Wait a minute... hasn't he told you?"

"Told us what?" Flitwick asked.

"I'm emancipated. Since I'm the last Potter, I've become Head of House. I own a flat in Diagon Alley, and I moved in there last July."

"Then... why's he trying to get you to go back?" Pomfrey asked. "Does he want you to be beaten?"

Harry just shrugged, before putting his shirt back on. "I don't know. But, I don't particularly want to find out."

"You live on your own?"

"Yes." Hermione's voice came back. "He invited me and my parents to Christmas Dinner. It was great."

"Where do we go from here?" Flitwick asked, breaking the quiet.

"Well..." Harry finished buttoning his shirt, and turned to the adults. "my plan basically involves going back to the dorm, then going to the end of year feast tonight. Then, I'll get on the train, and go back to my flat."

"What about the Headmaster?" Pomfrey asked.

"He knows where I live... by the way, Harry Potter lives at 93a Diagon Alley, London... but since it's under the Fidelius, he can't exactly send anyone else there."

The three adults nodded as new knowledge flooded into their minds about Harry's home. "We will have a word with the Headmaster." McGonagall promised. "If he tries anything, let us know."

Harry left Hermione in the common room, deciding to head to the library, see if he could find anything interesting about magical metalworking. His project, given to him by the castle's anthropomorphic manifestation of Rowena Ravenclaw, about creating a new way to travel by Portkey, would take a lot of effort. He'd been tinkering with the idea on and off for months, thinking about the best way to go about it, but still needed to make a few decisions.

“Mr. Potter.” A voice called up from one of the small niches in the corridor. Harry stopped, looking around, his eyes narrowing when he spotted the speaker.

“Snape.” He spat. “Something I can do for you?”

“I wanted a word with you.” Snape replied, sounding reasonably polite.

“Sorry.” Harry replied, turning his back on the greasy bastard. “Not interested.” He started to head towards the library door, when something slammed into his back, robbing him of consciousness. As he fell forward, he heard Snape’s final words.

“Didn’t say you had a choice.”

Snape covered both Harry and himself with a disillusionment charm, before levitating him back to the dungeons.

After Potter had been deposited onto the stone floor, he raised his wand. “Legilimens!”

He felt himself rushing forward, the Legilimency spell thrusting his consciousness into Harry’s.

When his eyes opened, he found himself floating in an environment of perfect blackness. As his eyes cleared, he noticed tiny pinpricks of light. He appeared to be floating in space.

Where the hell am I? He wondered. Where’s Potter?

In front of him, a large, circular shape rippled into view, the object dwarfing him in comparison. A beep in his ears announced the hated voice of his childhood enemy.

“Do you really think that you could beat me in here, you greasy bastard? You’ve brought yourself into my strong hold.”

Snape just sneered at the immense shape. “Show yourself, Potter!”

“Why? Do you really think that your feeble little mind could penetrate my shields?” A glowing nimbus of energy surrounded the shape, glowing green against the blackness of space.

“You have no skill in the mental arts, Potter.” Snape sneered. “I am a Master Legilimens. You are just an arrogant, glory-seeking child with no power.”

On the shape in front of him, two large tubes unfolded, pointing towards him. Not knowing what they were, Snape quickly strengthened his own mental shields.

“You know... it’s rather sad that you believe that, Snape. In here, I am the master of the universe.” A bolt of bright orange light left one of the tubes, smacking into Snape, jarring him, even through his shields.

“Is that all you have?” Snape shouted, rather shocked that an eleven-year old would be able to offer a defence. Even he, as a Master Legilimens, didn’t have a mindscape this well developed, and he’d been doing this for almost fifteen years.

“You silly bugger. That was a low-powered warning shot. You couldn’t handle my full power.” The sound of Harry’s chuckling filled Snape’s ears. “But, if you really want me to...” The shape suddenly began moving, twisting round as it pointed both metal tubes at him.

“Final chance, Smellerus. If you leave now, I’ll let you go.”

“Empty words from a powerless brat!” Snape shouted back, already triggering the mental sequence to end the spell. It didn’t work.

“Got more than enough to beat you, you little wanker.” With that, two bright orange beams left the tubes, impacting on Snape’s mental shields, sending waves of pain throughout his entire body. The shape manoeuvred up, three white glowing blobs leaving the underside. The first hit him, making his blood boil in his veins. Snape screamed silently, as the vacuum of space claimed him, his shields collapsing. The second bolt hit him, turning his blood to ice in his veins. Snape froze, all resistance gone.

“Resistance is futile.” A last message came from Potter, before the third bolt hit him, blowing him backwards.

Snape woke on the floor of the dungeon, shivering. He looked up to see Potter stood over him, his eyes blazing with fury.

“Try that again, Snape, and I swear there is no power on this planet that will stop me from killing you.” He turned and walked away, not giving Severus a second glance.

All strength gone, Snape collapsed backwards, trying to curl into a foetal ball, as his ravaged mind started to transmit the complaint to his body.

The end of year feast. A time for the students to generally eat as much as possible, make as much mess as they could, and generally be offensive little children.

Dumbledore stood up, clearing his throat to announce the results of the year. “Well... another year gone. For the seventh years, I hope that you have enjoyed your time here. Your graduation ceremony will be held tomorrow morning, starting at 11am.” He took a small sip from his goblet. “Now, the awarding of the two cups. The Quidditch Cup went to Ravenclaw house for their sterling victories this year.” The Ravenclaw table cheered loudly, certain people louder than others as they looked at the utterly defeated Slytherin table.

“The House Cup now needs awarding. In fourth place, with 409 points, Gryffindor. In third place, with 483 points is Slytherin. In second place, with 507 points... Hufflepuff house. In the lead, with 740 points, Ravenclaw house. So, Ravenclaw wins the house cup!” Again, the Ravenclaw table cheered, as the rest of the students clapped half-heartedly. Dumbledore was about to sit down, when Flitwick mumbled something. Dumbledore cleared his throat.

“One other thing. Professor Flitwick tells me about an... an alternative sport that has recently begun here at Hogwarts. Mr. Potter? Your ‘Underground Sock Quidditch League’?”

Harry stood up, making his way to the stage. He reached into his pocket, wandlessly creating a small shield. He pulled it out of his pocket, waving his wand to enlarge it.

“Thank you, Headmaster.” He cleared his throat. “As some of you are no doubt aware, earlier this year I started a new game here at school, ‘cause there isn’t really enough sport here. So, me and the Weasley twins came up with ‘Sock Quidditch’, played an exhibition game, and looked for other teams to sign up. So far, there’s been four games played. Since each team has only played once, it’s rather difficult to pick a clear winner. So, for the first season, the team with the highest points will win this attractive and high-quality shield.”

Harry quickly waved his wand at the shield. “The winner of the first annual Underground Sock Quidditch League is Cedric Diggory’s ‘Beware of the Badgers’ team, thanks to their stunning victory against Ron Weasley’s team, the Hodge Podges, in a 36-0 victory. Frankly, the Hodge Podges were very lucky to get the nil, proving that we have some future Chudley Cannon players here at school. Mr. Diggory? Would you like to collect the shield for your team?”

Cedric stood up, the Hufflepuff table, with the notable exception of Susan Bones, started clapping, proud of the dishy fourth-year. He collected the shield, presented it to Professor Sprout, and returned to his seat.

Harry, while Cedric was giving the shield to his Head of House, made his way back to his seat. Before he sat down, however, he made a final announcement. “By the way, we’re hoping that the UQL will become a regular feature here at Hogwarts. Next term, come and find me out, and we’ll set you up.”

He sat down, digging into his meal with gusto. While eating, he mused. So, Dumbledore... because I’m not playing nice with him, he didn’t award me and Hermione points for saving the Philosopher’s Stone. You petty old man.

After he’d finished his main course, he turned to Hermione, telling her about his confrontation with Snape, smiling as she burst out laughing.

This is unreal. In the original timeline, she’d have torn me a new one for attacking a professor. Now, she’s enjoying it. I must be a really bad influence on her. He decided to ask her. “Hermione, don’t take

this the wrong way, but why aren't you berating me for hurting a teacher?"

She smiled at him. "Harry, had you started it..." she blushed, "well... I'd still not have a go at you." She squeezed his hand. "I trust you, Harry. You're the most moral person I know. You wouldn't abuse your powers." She snorted. "Snape, the greasy git, does nothing but abuse his powers. So, if you managed to knock him down a few pegs, I'm all for it."

"Cool."

"Besides, I don't think I could get mad at you, even if I tried." She whispered, blushing again at him.

He chuckled. "That's actually a good thing. 'Cause you're rather scary when you're mad at people. Just need to ask Ron Weasley."

Hermione's face contorted into anger for a moment, before she released the tension with an explosive 'pah'. "He's such a bloody idiotic loser!"

"No arguments here." Harry said, raising his hands in surrender. "It's odd, though, isn't it? Percy, strict and rather limited, loves the rules. Ron, idiotic. But the twins are absolutely cool. Makes me wonder what their little sister's like."

"In love with you, remember?" Hermione said dryly, smiling at his pained expression. "Oh, Mr. Perfect Future Husband."

"Don't remind me."

The following day, Harry headed to the train station with Hermione, Blaise, Neville, Susan and Padma, with the twins and Tonks following in the carriage behind. They all headed for a compartment at the back of the train. With a couple of casual flicks of his wand, Harry expanded the compartment so it would be big enough for nine people, a multitude of pets and nine heavy trunks.

"Well... that was a hell of a year." Tonks volunteered.

"I know." Harry replied. "Somehow, though, I'm not surprised it was so... full of activity."

"Oh?" Blaise asked, his eyebrow creeping higher. "Why would that be?"

Harry gave a long-suffering sigh. "I don't think I'm qualified to have a nice, quiet life, Blaise. I am the walking personification of Murphy's Law."

"What's that?" asked Padma.

"Purebloods." Tonks, Harry and Hermione scoffed together.

"Murphy's Law states; 'whatever can go wrong, will go wrong.'" Harry offered. "However, there is a Potter addendum to the law. The Potter-Murphy Law states; 'whatever can go wrong, will go wrong, with as disastrous result as possible, in the most explosive and embarrassing way.'"

"Sounds about right." Tonks offered, grinning at Harry.

"You've no room to snigger, Nymphadora." Harry scolded. "At least I don't fall over stray particles of dust."

Tonks just pouted at him, before turning her nose into a pig-snout. "You're a pig, 'ickle Harry."

Harry just crossed his eyes at her, before tweaking her new pig snout. "Anyway... what are everyone's plans for the summer?"

Various responses of 'don't know', 'no plans' and a grunt from Tonks answered him. "Well... I was thinking about various summer activities we could have. Could throw a barbecue, that sort of thing."

Again, various positive responses and a grunt from Tonks answered him. "Well, I'll need to tell you where I live, since it's protected under a Fidelius. Are you all ready? Harry Potter lives at 93a Diagon Alley, London. Okay?" They nodded, as the vague memory of a flat above 93 Diagon Alley entered their minds.

The rest of the train ride flew past, a variety of games, conversations and mild flirting that left everyone breathless with laughter.

As the train pulled into King's Cross, the group vanished one by one, leaving Harry and Hermione alone in the compartment.

"Well... here we are." Harry said, the first piece of conversation in several minutes.

"Yes." Hermione muttered. "Here we are."

"Hermione?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Why is this weird?" He asked, she looked up, giggling slightly.

"I don't know." She pondered for a moment. "I think it's 'cause I don't want this year to end." She said quietly.

"I know what you mean." Harry replied. "It's been one of the best years of my life, Hermione."

"Mine, too." Hermione said softly. She looked up at Harry's face. "I don't wanna leave."

Harry moved from his bench until he was sat next to Hermione. He leaned close, pulling her into him. "It's not as though you'll never see me again, Hermione. You've got the mirror, so we can communicate every day. We can send letters with Hedwig."

"It's not the same as seeing you everyday, Harry. Being able to hold your hand... just being close to you. I like this... I'll miss this."

"Hermione..." Harry used his free hand to gently push her face up. He leaned forward, pressing a chaste kiss onto her lips. He leaned back, blushing slightly. "I'll miss you." He whispered. "But, we'll see each other again."

Hermione leaned forward, pressing her lips to Harry's for a few moments, before sitting back. "I hate this." She said quietly.

Chuckling, Harry said, "You know, Hermione, not every guy likes to hear that after he's kissed a girl."

"Not that!" Hermione said quickly, sounding scandalised. "I very much liked that, and would like to do it again, often. I just... I don't want to leave."

"We have to." Harry said, ever the voice of practicality. "But... we can spend time together this summer. I can Apparate, which means I can pop over to your house, and you and your parents are always welcome at my place."

"It's not the same, Harry." Hermione replied, leaning her head against his shoulder. "Damn it, in less than ten months, you've become the most important person in my life..."

You've been the most important person in my life for 111 years, Hermione. Harry thought. "You're mine too, Hermione. My Only."

"Your only what?" Hermione asked.

Harry chuckled. "I think it's the perfect nickname for you. My Only."

Hermione tilted her head a couple of times. "My Only... I suppose it works." She stared into his unbearably sexy green eyes. "What about you?"

"You'll think of something." Harry said. "I know we talked about this the other night... but I was wondering..." He sounded shy and unsure, and Hermione felt her heart melt yet again. "Would you want to be my girlfriend?"

"Yes!" She answered immediately. "Very much so, Harry." She leaned up again, pressing her lips to his, applying the tiniest amount of suction.

This is weird. Hermione thought, after the two had broken apart and grabbed their trunks. It's like I've known him for years...

The two got off the train, passing quietly through the portal onto the Muggle side. Harry looked around, half-expecting Vernon to be waiting for him on Dumbledore's orders, but found the platform blissfully free of the walrus.

They made their way over to the Granger, watching them smile as they saw the kids' entwined hands. Dan sighed as he reached into his pocket, pulling out a crisp £10 note, which he passed to his smirking wife.

"I'd ask, but I can pretty much guess the answer." Harry said, smiling at Dan.

"Damn you, Harry." Dan whined good-naturedly. "Couldn't you have waited 'til the start of next term? That was my bet."

"Sorry." Harry said. "Actually, I'm not. I could have done this quite happily last Christmas."

"I'm glad you two decided this." Emma said. "You two go well together."

"Thanks." Harry said. "Well, I need to get going. Got a lot of laundry to get done."

Hermione gave him one last kiss, before following her parents out of the station. Harry looked down at Hedwig's cage, smiling at his familiar. "Well... that's one hell of a year, isn't it, girl?"

Hedwig hooted, as Harry quickly dropped his trunk onto a trolley. "I wonder what happens next."

Another Author's Note: Okay, I know have some question for my loyal fans. Should Harry and his friends use guns and blades in their adventures? Personally, I think they should but if pople tell me 'no', I will listen. Also, what about a name for his group? Since his parents were the Marauders, I think Harry and the gang should have a name. Since they're going to become warriors for the light, using a variety of

weapons and tactics, I was thinking about 'Rangers', like the US Commandos. Please, tell me what you think.

– CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO –

In the Pale Moonlight – First Year

The Diary of Hermione Jane Granger – June 29th, 1992

Dear Diary,

Well... I've just completed my first year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I wish I'd never left my blasted diary at home. So much has happened.

First of all, for the first time in almost five years, I've made a friend. His name is Harry James Potter. I'd heard of him, of course, when I was collecting my schoolbooks. He was in several, since he's the one who vanquished an evil wizard a decade ago. How he did this, no one knows, not even him.

I met him in Flourish and Blotts, and he gave me a book, Mudbloods and Purebloods, which is offensive to Muggleborn, or as Harry calls us, First-generation, witches like me. I then encountered him again on the Hogwarts Express, and I wasn't very nice to him.

Then, I had the dubious pleasure of meeting Malfoy and his squad of Slytherin goons. Lovely people. Calling me a Mudblood, which is the Wizarding world's insult, saying that I have dirty blood.

After Harry broke Draco's nose, which was really quite amusing, he introduced himself to me properly. And that was it. I was hooked. He didn't belittle me, tease me, call me names. He's the most generous-spirited person I know.

It was Halloween, though, that cemented it. After an encounter with the youngest male Weasley (I really don't like him, either) I ran off crying into one of the girls' toilets. A troll, which we later found out was let in by Professor Quirrell, made its way into the bathroom. Trolls are on average 9-12 feet tall, tremendously strong, and have spell-resistant skin. Had the troll successfully attacked, I would have been gravely injured, at best, or possibly killed. I wasn't though.

Because of Harry. He physically beat the troll, then left, not wanting to claim the credit for his heroic deed.

Other people tried to claim the credit, and I, being my usual bossy self, told Harry to get up. I wish I hadn't now.

Damn him, anyway. That boy drives me absolutely crazy. The last couple of months, I've been having dreams about him that make my brain melt. His adorable mussed-up hair, his sexy green eyes... It's enough to make my heart melt into my chest.

There's other things about Harry as well. People generally say that an eleven-year old boy is an open book, easy to read and predict. The people who say that have never met Lord Harry James Bloody Potter. That boy has knowledge about things that just seems impossible. He also exudes... a presence, that's all I can describe it as. He has knowledge, power and control. Damn me if it isn't a little intimidating.

He's also had a horrible life up until he started Hogwarts. Just before school let out, Professor Dumbledore told Harry that he would have to go back to his abusive relatives. Harry took me, Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick to the hospital wing, where he asked for a medical examination.

My god... that poor boy! He told us about beatings, broken bones and whippings with an air of detachment... He's been abused, and Professor Dumbledore just wanted to send him back to that hell for nearly ten weeks! Harry refused, but I get the feeling that Dumbledore won't stop trying. I wonder how far he'll go...

As the train pulled into King's Cross, bringing us all home, Harry and I remained on the train. I really didn't want to get off, and come home. I wanted to stay with Harry, just for a few more minutes. He asked me to be his girl. I said yes... but what does it mean? I mean, I'm only twelve, soon to be thirteen, and he's not even twelve yet... From what my mum told me about boys, making a move like this means he wants something from me... but he doesn't act like it at all. I mean... he's kissed me, on the cheek, and forehead... but he's never pressed me for more than I'd be willing to give... And Mum and Dad like him... he acts so much more mature than an eleven-year old would.

It's almost as though he's already gone through puberty, and can fight off his hormones. Better than I can, at any rate.

I find myself asking the same question over and over again, whenever I think about him: Who are you, Harry Potter?

The Records of the Potions Master

Experiment #842: Wolfsbane Modification failed.

Had encounter with Potter brat before end of term feast. Stunned and used Legilimency on him. Has developed mindscape. Incredible mental control. Will be difficult to kill. Will continue observations until time to act.

Oh yes... I will kill the offspring brat of Potter...

The Daily Prophet – June 30th, 1992

The Boy-Who-Lived Saves Us Again?

By: Rita Skeeter

Rumours have circulated that at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the 'Boy-Who-Lived' is again battling Dark Wizards. Quiriness Quirrell, who was hired as the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, attempted to steal a priceless magical object, known as the Philosopher's Stone, which was being guarded at Hogwarts by Headmaster Albus Dumbledore.

I approached the Headmaster, who refused to comment. I approached Nicholas Flamel, noted alchemist and the creator of the Philosopher's Stone, who also refused to comment. Mr. Potter was also unavailable for comment.

What happened at Hogwarts school? Why was such a powerful and dangerous magical item being kept in a school full of children? How did the 'Boy-Who-Lived' manage to stop a Dark Wizard with only a

first year's education? More on this breaking story as it becomes available!

Harry James Potter – Personal Log

July 1st, 1992

Well... I'm back from Hogwarts. What an... interesting year. So far, I feel my mission to not interfere with the timeline has produced... adequate results. Obviously, some things have changed. I didn't have to spend a week in the hospital wing (yay!) with Pomfrey, always a bonus. I didn't go into the Forbidden Forest and see Voldemort, which again is a bonus.

I think I've managed to add a couple of things to the timeline that should help. When I encountered Quirrell-mort in the chamber, I gave him the impression that I was a nut. Hopefully, he should underestimate me when we meet in person in '95. I've also been providing Sirius with a few necessary items to help with his incarceration. Food and clothing should help him. Hmm, just remembered what he looked like when I saw him for the first time. I think I'll include a toothbrush in the next care package. Some deodorant probably wouldn't go amiss either.

Snape's been getting right on my tits. From September 1st to Christmas, the bastard had tried Legilimency 133 times. Add another hundred or so from New Year to when we broke up. He then had the testicular fortitude to stun me, and try to mind-rape me. Of course, when he entered my mindscape, I kicked the crap out of him. The next time he tries it, I'm just gonna burn his brain. See how the greasy bastard likes that.

Okay, my hand's getting sore from all this writing. I'll be glad when I buy that laptop, so I can just record or type these entries.

In a flat in Diagon Alley, a young man sat alone. It had been four days since he'd left Hermione behind at the train station. Four days of being alone in his flat. He'd spoken to her by mirror, several times a day, but it just wasn't the same as being with her in person. Feeling

her hand automatically seek out his. Smelling the faint vanilla traces from her shampoo. Just feeling the warmth of her body next to his.

He'd lasted almost a century without her, ever since she was killed in the Final Battle, but the last four days hurt. Spending everyday for ten months had reawakened his passion for her, which hadn't truly abated, enough to drive him crazy.

With a sigh, he dropped to the floor, carrying on with his training. Two hundred press-ups later, his arms were burning, as he flopped over, jabbing his feet under the couch, and started his sit-ups.

A chiming from above his television sounded, snapping him out of 'the zone'. "Accept!" He called to the mirror.

"Hello?"

"Morning, Harry!" Hermione's voice filtered over the mirror. "What're you doing?"

Harry grunted as he did his fiftieth sit-up. "Morning exercises."

In Crawley, a young lady was holding a mirror, watching it with fascinated delight. In it, she could see her new boyfriend, exercising vigorously. His back, horribly scarred but still quite sexy, showed his muscles rippling as he performed his sit-ups.

Emma Granger entered the kitchen, trying desperately to stifle a yawn. She detested mornings, convinced they were the creation of some evil super-being. She ambled over to the coffee maker, idly wishing she was back at Harry's, so she could enjoy his secret super-coffee, but would settle for own brew... for now.

"What're you doing, honey?" She asked her daughter.

Hermione didn't look her, just stared into her mirror with awe and a hint of lust in her eyes. Emma just shook her head, plucking the mirror from her daughter's hand. She looked into it, seeing Harry performing a rather brutal set of exercises. Keeping in mind that she was old enough to be the subject's mother, she cast an appreciative

glance. I can certainly see what Hermione sees in him. She noted, thrusting the mirror back at her daughter when the coffee maker pinged for her attention.

“Hey, Harry?” She called into the mirror.

“Yes, ‘Mione?”

“What’re your plans for the day?”

In the mirror, Harry stopped his exercises. He turned round to face her. “Not a lot. I need to trip to Gringotts to get some metal, and I could do with popping to PC World, but other than that, I’m free.”

“Metal? What do you need metal for?” Hermione asked, the thought of some new knowledge tickling her brain.

The reflection of Harry just grinned. “Do you remember that project I was telling you about? The Portkey research? It’s for that.”

“Oh... well, do you fancy popping round here later on? We could start on our homework.”

Harry gasped. “Do you mean to tell me that you’ve been home for four days, and you haven’t even started your homework yet, Hermione? I’m shocked... really.”

Hermione, in a shining example of maturity, stuck her tongue out at him. “Homework doesn’t rule my life, Mr. Potter. I admit, I like to get it done early, but it’s not the most important thing in the world to me.” You are. She added mentally.

“Shouldn’t be a problem. As soon as I’m showered and dressed, I’ll pop over.”

“Showered and dressed?” Dan repeated, entering the kitchen. “Why are you talking to my daughter if you’re not showered and dressed?”

“Morning, Mr. Granger.” Harry called up. “At the moment, I’m doing my exercises, so I am clothed. I should probably have said, ‘dressed for the day’.”

“Oh.” Dan sat down at the table, handily stealing his wife’s coffee. “Anyway, morning, Harry.”

“I’ll see you later.” Hermione said, blowing a kiss at the mirror. Harry’s face broke into a warm grin, that sent a tingle down her spine, before she tapped the mirror, closing the connection.

Dan and Emma shared at glance, smiling at their daughter’s rather blatant infatuation.

Harry completed his ab-crunches, flopping onto his back as his stomach burned. It may be good for me, but Christ, it hurts! He sat up, wincing as his stomach protested, then recoiled as he caught a whiff of himself. Oh, yeah... shower time.

It took a little under 20 minutes for him to shower, maul his hair down from ‘shocking’ to ‘messy, but it’ll do’, and dress, before he was out of the door, striding down Diagon Alley. Entering Gringotts, he waited patiently in line, watching people engage in their normal business. His visit to Gringotts was for multiple reasons; first, he wanted the Goblins to procure the necessary supplies for building his Portkey project, and second, he wanted to check on his parent’s will. That was something he hadn’t done in the original timeline, just believing what Dumbledore told him.

I really was a naïve prat last time. He noted idly, as he watched a little old lady hand in a small pile of sickles, wanting it to be put in her vault. He felt a stab of sympathy. There was no such thing as the old age pension in the Wizarding world. If you were poor, there was little you could do to change that situation. She ambled away, an aura of misery hanging over her head.

He approached the teller, bowing slightly. He looked at the nameplate on the desk. “Senior Teller Snatchmore.”

The goblin snarled at Harry. “What?”

"May your gold flow freely, Senior Teller." He said in Gobbledygook, startling the goblin. "I would like to request a favour. Could you please add this to that lady's deposit?" He handed over a pile of gold coins. "Don't tell her where it's come from. Just add it."

Snatchmore eyed him for a moment. "And why would you give gold away, sir?"

Harry just shrugged. "Sometimes a good deed is it's own reward." He pushed the gold forward, then pulled back his hand. "Now, Senior Teller, I would like to speak to Account Manager Griphook, please. At his earliest convenience."

Snatchmore nodded, straightening up in his chair. Account Manager Griphook was in charge of the Potter account, one of the largest held in Gringotts. "Lord Potter?" Snatchmore asked quietly. Harry just nodded. "Would you come with me, please?"

Griphook's office was elegantly, but lavishly appointed. It appeared that working with the rather large Potter account had done wonders for him. Since Gringotts took a four percent handling fee, three for the bank and one for the advisor, it was plain that he'd made some quite good investments.

The goblin looked up as he saw his client walk in. "Lord Potter. It is... agreeable to see you again."

Harry's jaw dropped. Shit... For a goblin, that was practically a declaration of love. "Account Manager Griphook. May our endeavours bring us gold, and smite our enemies."

"May we dance on the bones of our enemies, Lord Potter." Griphook replied, smiling at Harry. "Please, sit. How may I serve you today?"

This is really weird... Harry noted as he sat down. Goblins are never this nice... "I'm curious, Account Manager. Your conduct with me is rather... atypical of a Goblin account manager."

Griphook grinned. "Lord Potter-"

“Harry, Account Manager.” Harry interrupted. “I prefer ‘Harry’.”

“Very well, Harry.” Griphook made a notation. “Now, my ‘atypical behaviour’ is a result of our recent dealings. We have made a considerable profit on your account, allowing Gringotts to make a profit, and myself as well.”

Ah. To make a goblin smile, make him rich. “Excellent, Account Manager. I have come here for some routine matters regarding my account, as well as looking at some investment strategies. If this would not be an inconvenient time for you?”

“I am at your disposal, Harry.” Griphook said. “What can I do for you first?”

“I forgot when I came in last summer, to look into the will of my parents, Account Manager. I would like to do so now, if possible.”

Griphook nodded, tapping his ledger with a hooked finger. “I am summoning the document from our archives now, Harry. While we wait, is there any other matters?”

Harry pondered for a moment. “Actually, yes. I was hoping you could tell me what transactions have occurred on my account between the dates that my parents dies and I arrived at Gringotts. I have never received a statement for my account.”

Griphook turned the pages in the ledger, coming to the account history. “There were several transactions and investments made by Albus Dumbledore on the account, during your... absence, Harry.”

“What?” Harry’s voice was cold. “Dumbledore was taking my money?”

“No, Harry.” Griphook shook his head. “Albus Dumbledore made a standing order on your account, to be triggered on September 1st, 1991. This is standard for all Hogwarts students. It would have been set up by your parents, but they passed away before it could be done.”

Harry leaned back slightly, a little less angry, but still confused. "What else?"

"He made investments on your behalf in the Nimbus Broom company, as well as several Muggle companies. A company called... 'AOL'? As well as two food companies... one called 'PG' and the other 'Cadbury's'."

"Huh?" Harry asked. "Dumbledore made investments for me? Isn't that against the banking code to let someone else access my account?"

Griphook nodded. "In most cases, yes. However, since you were placed with Muggle relatives, it was deemed... unwise to allow them to access your account. Your affairs in the Wizarding world have been watched over by Mr. Dumbledore."

Harry nodded. It made sense... "Were they good investments?" Harry asked.

Griphook tilted his hand in a 'so-so' gesture. "Financially speaking, they were not the most profitable investments that could have been made. However, since there was no one available to direct the account, Mr. Dumbledore made investments in low-risk, reasonable return endeavours. There was little chance of the food companies lowering in value. In fact, over the ten years you were away, they made returns of almost two thousand galleons. As I say, not the most profitable, but reasonably secure."

One hundred thousand pounds... Not too shabby, Albus. "What about the other investment?"

"Hmm..." Griphook looked at the ledger. "It's a Muggle company. I, personally, don't know what this 'interweb' is, but it has a much higher return. That has made almost six thousand galleons in the last four years."

Another three hundred grand... So, Albus' interference has given me enough money to live comfortably in the Muggle world for twenty

years. Or ten years reasonably affluently. He nodded. "And what about your work on my behalf, Account Manager?"

Griphook smiled a feral smile. "We've moved your money around mercilessly, Harry. By taking an... aggressive nature, we've managed to clear a profit of almost ten thousand galleons since last July."

Harry whistled through his teeth. Five hundred thousand pounds net profit? Good lord... wish I'd done this the first time around. "Excellent work, Account Manager! I believe I pay four percent charges, yes? Three for the bank, and one for you?" Griphook nodded. "I'd like to increase that to five percent. Three for the bank, and two for you. With such excellent work, I believe more profit should be sent your way."

Griphook's feral grin got wider. "You know how to deal, Harry, an excellent skill for a young wizard. Are there any companies you wish to invest in at the present time?"

Hmm... which company was up and coming in the early Nineties... Ah, mobile phones! "Yes, Account Manager. I would like you to invest in mobile telecommunications companies. Orange, Vodafone, Mercury(1) and Cellnet(2). I believe these companies should increase our wealth considerably." He watched the greedy goblin make a note. Ah, motivated employees... such a thing to behold.

The heavy ledger in front of Griphook chimed. "Ah, your parents' will." He flipped the pages, quickly reading it through. "Pretty much standard. In the event of both of your parents becoming deceased, all properties, assets and titles become yours. A trust is set up to provide for you while you're in school, then the full amount is accessible to you once you come of age." He looked up. "Of course, since you are an emancipated minor, you have full access."

"Nothing else?" Harry asked. "No bequests for my parents' friends or family? No conditions that should be made regarding my guardianship?"

Griphook quickly scanned the document. "No bequests were specified. I would speculate that it would be up to you to decide to

distribute any wealth necessary. With regards to your guardianship, in the event of your parents' death, your guardianship should revert to either Mr. Sirius Black, or Mrs. Alice Longbottom. In the event that they were unable to take you, you should be sent to an appropriate family, where you will be cared for properly." He looked up again. "Usually, this is done through the Wizarding Child Services department of the Ministry of Magic."

Well, that wasn't bloody done in this case, was it? Harry thought to himself. "I see. There was one other thing that I was hoping you could assist me with, Account Manager." Griphook merely raised an eyebrow. "I require access to some metal. Rather... unique metal. It's an alloy." He held out a piece of parchment to the goblin.

"Hmm... A hyper-alloy, if I'm not mistaken." He read through. "These are rather... specific requirements. Twenty-two percent titanium, forty-three percent Kevlar... Kevlar? I'm not familiar with that metal."

"It's a Muggle invention. It's very strong, but it's not a metal, it's a molecular polymer. Used by Muggles to prevent projectiles from penetrating flesh. It's a form of armour. Used by the Armed Forces."

Griphook nodded. "What else... fifteen percent platinum and twenty percent molybdenum. A curious mixture, Harry. These sizes?"

"I need three sections seven feet by three feet, two three-feet square pieces, and finally, two pieces seven feet by eighteen inches. Each section needs to be approximately one and a half inches thick. I also require a set of metal working tools of industrial-strength diamond, as well as several drilling pieces." He watched Griphook make some notes. "How soon can it be obtained?"

"It may take several weeks for the alloy to be created. Assuming that we can obtain the necessary supplies."

Harry rolled his eyes. "A thousand galleons if it's ready within the next seven days."

"Done." Griphook said instantly. "There's also a few other pieces on here. 'A twelve inch sphere'?"

“Housing for a reactor.” Harry replied. “I’m already working on the necessary components for that.” Please don’t ask.

Griphook nodded. “Very well, Harry. We shall contact you within the next week.” He glanced at Harry. “Assuming this mixture is effective, would you consider selling it to the goblin nation as armour? If it’s as effective as you say.”

“It’s too heavy.” Harry replied. “Each of the seven-foot pieces weighs just under a ton. It wouldn’t be practical as armour.”

Griphook pouted, a truly disturbing expression on a Goblin. “Very well.”

“There’s one last thing. I need to make some purchases at a Muggle store. Do you have a way for me to make said purchases without carrying a bundle of cash?”

With another nasty grin, Griphook snapped his fingers, creating a plain white plastic card. “A new invention. The Gringotts debit card.”

Harry took the card and smiled. Goblins truly were the most impressive magical species, closely followed by the House-Elves. Witches and Wizards were considerably further down the list. He stood up. “I thank you for your time, Account Manager. I realise that you are busy, so I will leave you to your work. May your gold flow freely.”

Without another word, Harry left the office, passing through the lobby. Now... some shopping in the Muggle world.

It was an hour later when an exhausted and extremely frustrated Harry Potter apparated into the Grangers’ back garden. With a muffled grunt, he knocked on the door, watching as Emma’s head appeared in the window, before she opened it.

“Hi, Harry.” She said brightly.

“Hmm.” Harry grunted, before he remembered his manners. “Morning, Mrs. Granger.” He followed her into the house, placing his bags on the floor.

“What’s wrong?” Emma asked, sitting down on the couch.

“Bloody PC World...” He snarled, before he gathered himself. “Sorry. I was shopping in PC World, and had to fight the damned sales rep to get what I needed.”

Emma winced. “Yes... we went there to get some equipment for the office... they’re not the most polite people in the world, are they?(3)”

He just snorted, and slumped on the couch next to her.

Hermione came bustling into the living room, seeing her boyfriend slumped on the couch, she ‘eeped’, and dashed over, wrapping him in a ‘Hermi-hug’. “Are you all right?”

“In a minute.” Harry mumbled into her neck, enjoying the sensation of Hermione pressed up against him. After a few moments, he pulled back, looking better. “Thank you, My Only.” He whispered into her hair.

“What’s wrong?”

Harry sighed. “Just went shopping. Damned sales reps... they’ll be the death of me. You go in, you know what you want, and they have to try and upsell you, don’t they? Can’t just let you walk out with what you want.”

She just snickered prettily. “What were you shopping for?”

“A few computer supplies.” Harry said vaguely. “It’s for that project I’m working on.”

“Oh...” Hermione had only a vague idea of what he was actually working on, so she just shrugged. “Did you get your metal?”

"Yep. Goblins said it should be ready within the week. Then, I just need to put it together. With any luck, should be ready by the end of the summer."

"And you're still not gonna tell me what it is?" Hermione asked, smiling coyly at him.

"Nope. Be a surprise for you." Harry replied smugly, crossing his arms over his chest. "So, what do you wanna do today?"

"Mum wants to go to Alton Towers." Hermione replied. The children looked at Emma, who was smiling and nodding like a child, causing both of them to roll their eyes.

"Sure." Harry said. "Let me just drop all my goodies at home, and I'll be right with you." Without standing up, Harry extended his hand, summoning his shopping to him, before vanishing with a tiny pop. Less than thirty seconds later he was back, still in sitting position on the couch. "I'm ready."

After an exhausting day at the theme park, Harry slumped on the couch at the Grangers'. The prospect of returning home didn't appeal, since the flat was empty, apart from Hedwig. Then again, she'd taken to stalking the Muggle side of the Leaky Cauldron, hoping to find a couple of fat mice.

He was about to offer to cook dinner, when an alarm went off. With a muffled curse, Harry tapped his watch. "Someone's in my flat." He said to the Grangers.

Hermione stood up, drawing her wand. "I'll come with you, Harry." She said.

"No." Harry replied. "You're not authorised to use magic over the holidays." He stood. "I'll need to investigate." With another faint pop, he vanished.

As he reappeared inside his home, Harry sent out a wave of magic. It was a nifty little combat trick he'd learnt in the future, acting like sonar and bouncing off other magic. His wave detected four other magic

users inside the room. As he fully materialised, his wand was pointing at the most powerful of the four. "Identify yourself!" He snapped.

As his eyes focussed, he saw Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick and Pomfrey sitting on his couches, looking startled. With a sigh, he sheathed his wand, and made his way over to the communications mirror hanging above the television. With a jab on the rune button, he called Hermione. Her worried face appeared in front of him.

"It's the Professors from school, My Only." He said warily. "I'll call you later." She nodded, and vanished from view. Harry turned round sharply. "You know, when I told you all where I lived, I didn't exactly mean it as an invitation to come round whenever you felt like." He directed his gaze to Dumbledore. "Why are you here, Headmaster? Last I recall, I was behaving in a fit of 'childish rebelliousness'. I'm surprised you still want to speak to me."

Dumbledore looked down at his hands for a moment. "The other professors believed I should come and speak to you, Mr. Potter."

Harry sighed heavily, before heading into the kitchen. "I'll put on some coffee."

With the coffee on the table, Harry sat down on the couch, next to McGonagall. "So, what's the reason for breaking into my flat at seven o'clock in the evening?"

Dumbledore looked up, offended at being told he was breaking into someone's abode. The fact that he actually was breaking in didn't enter his mind. "We needed to speak to you, Mr. Potter. About your summer arrangements."

Harry's eyebrow arched. "If you think you can tell me to go back to the Dursleys, Headmaster, you can bugger off now. I will never return to Privet Drive. You'd have to take me by force."

Flitwick cleared his throat. "Frankly, Harry, we're not here to force you to do anything."

"That's a good thing." Harry said firmly.

“For the last few days, Harry, we’ve been in discussion with regards to your living arrangements.” McGonagall said firmly. “Professor Dumbledore believes you should return to your Aunt’s house, stating that there are special wards available to you, that will protect you from anything.”

“Except the Dursleys themselves.” Harry retorted. He turned to the Headmaster. “Do you not remember the conversation we had last New Year’s, Headmaster? I explained to you about the Dursleys being abusive. How they took pleasure in beating me. And now, you want me to return to them.”

“They are your family, Mr. Potter.” Dumbledore said firmly, lacing his words with magic, a form of low-level compulsion. “I’m sure, if we explained the situation to them, they would become more supportive.”

Harry turned to Pomfrey. “Did you show him the results of your mediscan?”

She shook her head. “I can only divulge critical information, under the school’s medical charter. That basically means I can tell the Headmaster if he is able to obtain emergency supplies. Routine medical exams are not included.”

“So, Headmaster... after telling you earlier this year that the Dursleys don’t like me, you think I should just forgive them, and move back, correct?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Forgiveness is a priceless gift, Harry. They’re the last of your family. You should reach out to them. Embrace them as family.”

McGonagall, Flitwick and Pomfrey snorted. Harry maintained a passive expression, staring at the old man. “What’s your real reason?” He asked quietly.

“My... my real reason?” Dumbledore asked warily. “I simply want to make sure you get along with your family, my dear boy. Family’s very important.”

Harry sat back on the couch, not taking his gaze away from Dumbledore. "What's. Your. Real. Reason?" He asked again, his voice turning icy cold.

"I'm not sure what you're implying, Harry."

"Aren't you?" Harry asked mockingly. "Let me ask you something else, then, Headmaster. Would you normally take this much interest in an orphaned student of yours? Would you work so hard at getting them to return to abusive relatives? Or am I just a special case?"

Dumbledore looked uncomfortable, but surged ahead. "As the 'Boy-Who-Lived', Harry, you're very important to the Wizarding world. After your recent brush with Lord Voldemort, it is very important that you stay safe. Behind the wards at your family's home, you would be safe."

"Hmm..." Harry rested his steepled fingers under his chin. "Under certain circumstances, which can never happen, that may be true. However, I still don't believe you."

"I'm not certain what information it is that you seek, Harry." Dumbledore said, taking a small sip of his coffee.

"What is your goal here tonight, Dumbledore?" Harry asked sharply. "Assuming everything went how you wanted it to, what would happen?"

"You would return to your family at Privet Drive. Ideally, you would send your owl to Hogwarts, so that she cannot be tracked."

The other three Hogwarts' staff members watched their leader warily. Harry nodded slowly. "You wish me to remain locked at my relatives' house. I presume that, under ideal circumstances, I would be confined to the house, and incommunicado, yes?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"And what is your reason for these restrictions?"

"As I have stated, Harry, it is purely for your own safety. Not all of Voldemort's servants and allies were captured ten years ago. Some of them may try to harm you."

"I see." Harry said. "And the fact that I would be held there, against my will, would generate considerable gratitude towards yourself when I was 'rescued' by you at the end of summer, wouldn't it? I could be a good little pawn for you."

Dumbledore looked offended. "What? How could you think that of me? I have only the greater good in mind, Mr. Potter. Everything I do, I do for the betterment of our world."

"Yes, that was the argument you used when we were back at Hogwarts. I asked you then how my returning to Privet Drive was for the greater good. I have some issues with that, which I will bring up later. You still have not explained, to my satisfaction, how returning to the Dursleys will serve the greater good."

Pulling off his glasses, Dumbledore rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Mr. Potter, why do you persist in this argument? I have tried to make it clear to you that I know what must be done. All I ask is that you trust me."

"No." Harry said simply. "Frankly, you've done very little to inspire trust in me. You have basically told me what to do, in my personal life, with no reasons given. 'Return to the Dursleys'. Translation: go somewhere where they will starve you, and try to break you, so you'll be a good little weapon for the great chess-master'. We've had this conversation. Your reasons didn't work then, and they won't work now." He stood up, refilling his coffee cup. "If there's nothing further, Headmaster, I'll ask you to leave."

Dumbledore back-tracked. "Why do you distrust me so, Harry? I've made sure that you were protected for the last ten years."

"You left me with abusive bastards!" Harry hissed. He jumped to his feet, ripping off his shirt. He turned to Dumbledore. "You see the

results of your 'protection', old man? The Dursleys tried to beat the magic out of me. Obviously, it failed, but the effort was still there!"

Dumbledore's face had turned white. "What did you do to earn such a beating?"

"Earn?" Harry hissed, his tone dropping icy cold. "I did nothing to 'earn' such a beating! It was my tenth birthday present from the bastards!" With a snarl, Harry hurled his cup onto the wall, just above Dumbledore's head. "Why didn't you check up on me? I know Arabella Figg is a squib, reporting to you!"

"She never reported anything of the sort to me, Harry. You must believe me!"

"Right now, old man, I wouldn't believe you if you told me water was wet!" Harry shouted. "I was abused for ten years... why? Because you couldn't be arsed checking up on me! It wasn't your place to put me with them in the first place! I should have gone to Alice Longbottom, or been put with a Wizarding family! Why did you interfere?" Harry was now red in the face and panting from containing his anger.

McGonagall was pale; she'd seen the horrific scars on his back before, but they still made her feel sick. She'd been involved in Harry being left at the Dursleys. She'd warned Albus that they were 'the worst sort of Muggles', but he'd still left Harry there.

"At the time, it was the safest place to leave you." Dumbledore said weakly.

"Safe?" Harry parroted, snarling at the old man. "You call this 'safe'? What the bloody hell's your idea of 'dangerous'?" Without waiting for a reply, Harry stomped into the kitchen, willing himself to calm down. Even though he had a century of Occlumency experience, his rage didn't want to be stamped out. He took a few deep breaths, grabbing a bar of chocolate from the fridge. He scoffed it down, letting the smooth, milk chocolaty goodness work its magic on him.

After almost five minutes, he walked back into the living room, throwing himself onto the couch. "Now, explain to me why going to the Dursleys would be better for me."

"T-The blood wards will protect you from Dark wizards looking for you." Dumbledore stammered.

"Blood wards are useless without the appropriate emotional connection from both parties, Headmaster." Harry replied in a neutral tone. "Since she hates me and I hate her, they won't work. Next point?"

Dumbledore gathered his wits. "Harry, it is better for you to stay there. If you connect with your family, you will have a protection Voldemort could never penetrate. Surely you can see the benefits to having that protection, not only for you, but for your family as well."

"They are not my family." Harry replied, not bothering to get upset anymore. It was plain to him that Dumbledore wasn't listening to him. "She hates me and I hate her. The Blood wards will never work. Next point?"

"Harry, please. I must ask that you trust me. You should return to your family, and reach out to them. It's for the greater good that you have a place of protection."

"They hate me and I hate them." Harry monotoned, not really listening any more. He turned to McGonagall. "Professor, am I speaking English here? I'm sure I am, but he doesn't seem to be getting it."

"You are speaking English, Harry. I, personally, agree with you." She turned to face her boss. "What's the real reason, Albus. I know you. You never do things without a reason."

"I do have my reasons, Minerva, but at the moment, I can't share them." He looked weary. "It's an unfortunate responsibility that comes with being the leader of the light. I'm not always able to pass on all the information that may be required."

"You're the leader of the light?" Harry asked, watching Dumbledore nod, as though carrying a great burden. "That's great, but how the hell does that give you authority over me?"

Dumbledore looked at him strangely for a moment. "I am your Headmaster, Mr. Potter. I am the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. The Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards."

"True." Harry admitted. "But that doesn't relate to me. The Wizengamot can't get involved in my situation, since it's nothing to do with them. The ICW won't get involved. And yes, you're the Headmaster of Hogwarts. But, since I'm seriously considering not returning, because of your actions, how is that relevant?"

"Not returning?" McGonagall and Flitwick said together.

"It's his fault." Harry said defensively, pointing at Dumbledore. "I mean... why does he have such an intense interest on my summer arrangements? If I didn't know better, I'd swear he was trying to make sure I'm kept weak and pliable."

All three adults turned to Dumbledore. "Albus?" Flitwick asked icily.

"I am not trying to keep Mr. Potter weak, hurt or vulnerable. Indeed, my actions are solely for his protection. The wards at Privet Drive-

"Are useless!" Poppy snapped, interrupting Dumbledore. "We have proof that they do not work! This has been explained to you several times, Headmaster! Why are you not listening?"

"They would work if Mr. Potter cared about his relatives." Dumbledore said, looking at Harry with disappointment in his eyes.

"Get. Out." Harry said, not looking at Dumbledore.

"My boy, please reconsider. You're leaving them defenceless. And for what? Some misguided attempt to establish your own independence?"

“Albus!” McGonagall exclaimed. “How dare you?”

Harry’s eyes lit up, casting light around the room. He slowly swivelled his head to look at Dumbledore. “If that is what you truly believe, Mister Dumbledore, then our discussions have come to an end. I will not return to Hogwarts. I will simply leave the Wizarding world. Since I’m obviously so dangerous, I’ll make sure I’m not around.”

Dumbledore quickly back-pedalled. “That’s not what I mean at all, Harry, my boy! I simply wish for you to do this, for the greater good! Don’t you care about the greater good of the Wizarding world?”

Damn, I honestly can’t believe this man. Harry thought. His eyes powered down, returning to their normal state. “Listen to me, Mr. Dumbledore, for I shall say this only once; you will tell me, right now, why you are so interested in me, or you will leave me alone, forever. I have had enough interference in my life from you.”

“Interference?” Dumbledore asked. “In what way have I interfered with your life?”

Harry just stared at him incredulously. “You... sent... me... to... the... Dursleys.” He said slowly. “Frankly, I’m getting bored of having this bloody conversation. You’re not listening to me. You keep spouting the same tired lines to me, that will not work.”

“I am listening to you, Harry.” Dumbledore replied. “But, I do not understand where all this mistrust has come from.”

“You’ve done nothing to inspire trust.” Harry replied simply. “You’ve interfered several times. What did the Sorting Hat tell you?”

You’ll find he’s nothing like the rest of the children in this school. The memory of the Sorting Hat’s warning flared up in Albus’ mind. “What do you want?” He asked, in a defeated voice.

Harry suppressed a small smile. “I want my freedom, Headmaster. I want the answers to my questions now, regardless of whether you think I am too young or not. If you answer my questions to my satisfaction, I may consider trusting you. Lie to me, or withhold

information, and you'll never see me again. Are we clear?" Harry's voice was as hard as diamond and cold as ice.

Dumbledore just nodded.

"First of all, why are you so interested in my summer arrangements, notably sending me back to the Dursleys, when I've already given you damned good reasons for not returning?"

"In a word; safety. As I explained earlier, if the Blood wards were working correctly, you would have an impenetrable defence against Voldemort and his followers."

"And I have explained to you that the Blood wards will not, and will never work, because of the mutual hatred between my relatives and me. Since I have explained that numerous times, why do you keep insisting that I return?"

"I... they could be reconstituted, if the familial bonds were there." Dumbledore looked meek and pliant, something Harry had never seen, even with his future knowledge. "I was hoping that they could be rebuilt."

Harry nodded. "That's part of the answer. Why are you so concerned with my summer arrangements, though? With all due respect, it's not your place to worry about orphans. It would be part of the Wizarding Child Services department at the Ministry."

"It was because of my actions that your parents are dead." Dumbledore replied. McGonagall, Flitwick and Pomfrey gasped as they considered the implications of that statement.

"You mean, it was your suggestion that they went into hiding." Harry clarified. He already knew this, but the others didn't.

"Yes. I suggested that they used the Fidelius charm to hide themselves. I gave Lily the information on how to cast the charm. If I had done something different..."

“For of all sad words of tongue and pen/the saddest are these: it might have been.” Harry quoted. “John Greenleaf Whittier. I can understand your... devotion, to my well-being, Headmaster. And I appreciate that devotion. But your actions are less than appreciated. You have never once asked me what I want to do.”

Dumbledore grunted. “I’m 152 years old, Mr. Potter. In my fifteen decades of life, I’ve never seen an eleven-year old with a decent understanding of the way the world works.”

“Because you hadn’t met me.” Harry retorted without hesitation. “I have an excellent understanding of how the world works.” He shook his head. “Now, my next question: why was the Philosopher’s Stone brought to Hogwarts?”

“Protection.” Dumbledore answered simply.

“Protection from what?” Harry asked. “And why now?”

Dumbledore hesitated for a moment. Harry could tell, however, that this was not hesitation born from lying, but simply how to answer the question. “There have been... rumours, that Dark wizards were seeking the stone. I don’t know how much you know about the stone, but it’s powers cannot be underestimated.”

“Two powers.” Harry said. “Immortality and economics. I can understand your desire to protect the stone. However, why did you do it the way you did? Why hide it with traps? Why not under a Fidelius charm? Or behind wards? And why did you announce it to the school?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.” Dumbledore said.

“You announced the presence of a highly dangerous magical artefact to a bunch of children, Headmaster. You told them where it was. Avoid the third floor corridor. I can’t believe that you’re so removed from the youth of today that you don’t know that saying something like that will immediately gather their attention.”

"It was a fair warning." Dumbledore said defensively. "Telling people not to go there should ensure that they don't."

"No." Harry replied, shaking his head. "Telling people not to go there would pretty much guarantee that they would go there. But, no matter. Why wasn't it under a Fidelius? Or behind wards?"

McGonagall cleared her throat. "It's very difficult to add wards to Hogwarts, Harry. Hiding something behind a new ward in the castle is problematic, at best. That's why we laid traps."

Traps that a trio, or even a duo, or students can get past. "Fair enough." He turned back to Dumbledore. "Another question: why did you try and influence the Sorting Hat to put me in Gryffindor?"

"I... I felt that Gryffindor would better suit you, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore said, not looking Harry in the eyes.

"Really?" Harry asked, bemused. "Somehow, I don't believe that. The Sorting Hat is another powerful magical artefact, specifically designed to sort the children based on their personalities. Influencing that decision means that people aren't going to their proper places."

"As I stated, Mr. Potter, you would have been best placed in Gryffindor."

"You mean, it wouldn't be appropriate for the 'Boy-Who-Lived', the 'Vanquisher-of-Voldemort' to be a Slytherin? Also, by putting me into Gryffindor, you could persuade Ron Weasley to be my friend, thereby assuring that I remain 'true to the light', by being associated with a confirmed-light family, yes?"

Dumbledore nodded sheepishly. "The Weasleys are good people, Harry."

"I'm sure they are. Ron's an arsehole, though. Fred and George are cool, but they've told me some disturbing things about their sister."

"Oh?" McGonagall asked.

"Yeah." Harry ran his fingers through his hair. "Apparently, she's a BWL-groupie. She's never met me, and is convinced I'd be the perfect husband for her." He glanced up suddenly at Dumbledore. "Tell me; did your plans for me involve me marrying the young Miss Weasley? Keeping me attached to a light family?" He stared imperiously at Dumbledore. "And tell me the truth."

"In a word, no." Dumbledore replied, looking faintly insulted at the suggestion. "Would I force you or Miss Weasley to become betrothed? No. Would I like to see it... well, yes. She's a representative of an old, powerful light-side family. Politically, a good match."

"And if I wanted to date a Muggleborn?" Harry asked. "If I wanted to 'pollute my bloodline with Mudblood filth', as I believe a student at Hogwarts called it. What would the old families say about that?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "With respect, Harry, I really don't care." He shrugged. "Your romantic life is your own. I would not try to steer you from it. I would recommend that you date and marry for love, instead of political or financial power."

Harry nodded slowly, happy with the answer. "Now... the larger issues. Do you, or do you not, have plans involving me in the future?"

Dumbledore stared at Harry for a few moments, remembering what he'd said earlier in the conversation. 'Lie to me, or withhold information, and you'll never see me again.' "In a word, yes."

"I see." Harry leaned back on the sofa. "And why do you have these plans?"

"You will need training, Mr. Potter. Training that only I and a few select others can provide to you, to ensure your survival in the Wizarding world." Dumbledore gestured to his fellow educators. "There are things that you will need to learn from us."

"You make it sound so... Orderly, sir." Harry replied, smirking internally as he watched the teachers flinch.

“That brings me to another topic, Mr. Potter.” Dumbledore said, slowly starting to regain his form. “Your knowledge. You said when I share more with you, you would share more with me. I believe that it’s time to complete that transaction.”

Harry shook his head. “At the moment, sir, I have little-to-no trust in you. I trust Minerva, Filius and Poppy more, but not enough to share that much.” He gave Dumbledore a look that was both condescending and patronising, a look he’d been the recipient of, more than once. “All in good time, Headmaster.”

“Mr. Potter, you must-”

“I ‘must’, sir?” Harry asked icily. “I ‘must’ do nothing. I will share when it is relevant. Not before.” He glanced down at his watch. “Look at the time. I think it’s time to go, people. I need to call Hermione, then I’m gonna go in the bath and go to bed. I’m knackered.”

“Harry?” McGonagall said, placing her hand over his. “Will you be returning to Hogwarts in September?”

Harry looked up at Dumbledore. “Will I be free of manipulations, or will I need to search for another school, Headmaster?”

“I resent the suggestion that I am manipulating you, Harry.” Dumbledore said stiffly. “I am simply trying to guide you, as you become more accustomed to the Wizarding world.”

“If you’re trying to guide me in becoming ‘accustomed to the Wizarding world’, why do you want me to hide in the Muggle world during the holiday?” Harry retorted. McGonagall could have grinned. It was a damned good question...

“As I have stated, Mr. Potter, it is for your own safety.” Dumbledore replied, near-glaring at the young wizard.

“Indeed.” Harry said dryly. “If I’m free of the Headmaster’s manipulations, I will return.”

Flitwick, Pomfrey and McGonagall stepped in between Harry and Dumbledore. "You will be free of any manipulation, Harry." McGonagall stated. "I'll make sure of it myself."

The foursome began to leave. "Oh, one more thing." Harry called out, stopping them in their tracks. Dumbledore turned round slowly, wondering what else the boy was going to saddle him with. "Sort out your dog, Headmaster. If Snape tries to Legilimens me one more time, I will rip his mind to shreds. I know you need him, which is why I've tolerated it so far. But no more."

McGonagall's head span to Dumbledore so sharply, Harry idly wondered if she'd get whiplash. "I... I will have another talk with Severus." The old man said weakly.

As soon as they had gone, Harry made his way back over to the mirror above the television, tapping the rune. "You heard?" He asked.

"Yes." Hermione's voice replied. "That's a cool function of these mirrors." She looked at him intently. "Would you really leave Hogwarts? Leave me behind?"

Harry shook his head. "No." He said softly. "I could leave Hogwarts... but not you." Her reflection smiled warmly at him. He sighed heavily. "He's not gonna let it go, My Only. He'll keep interfering with my life. 'For the greater good', of course."

"Why? That's what I wanna know." Emma's voice came drifting over the mirror.

"I could hazard a guess," Harry offered, "but without more data, I'd be reluctant to do so." He slumped back onto the couch. "I've only been here a year, and already the old man's pissing me off." He muttered.

"We'll get through this, Harry." Hermione offered. "You and me... we'll get through it."

He looked up at the mirror and smiled, a genuine smile. "You and me." He said, winking at her, then chuckling when Hermione blushed prettily.

The following day, after his relaxing bath and sleep, Harry rose, performing his morning ablutions: have a piss, brush his teeth, do his exercises, shower the stink of his work out off, and drink enough coffee to wake up every student at Hogwarts. He padded into the living room, unpacking his shopping. He opened up the boxes, pulling out the GPS scanner he'd bought, along with a laptop, several connection cables, two mobile phones, and an abundance of software and miscellaneous peripherals.

He set up the laptop, charging the battery. Once it was charged, he'd be able to add a charm that would mean it would never need charging again, and a second charm to make it work in a magic-rich environment. He quickly began work on the basics of the main console, conjuring basic sheet aluminium as required. As a non-noble metal, it could be conjured, and with enough power, it could be made to be permanent, instead of fading as most conjured items would.

He worked for the next forty hours, not noticing that he was neither eating nor sleeping. He'd put together the components necessary. Now, all he needs was the metal from the goblins, and he could begin the last part of the physical construction.

As soon as he was finished, he slumped back, letting sleep overtake him.

"Mum?"

"Yes, Hermione?"

Hermione looked down at her lap, before asking her question. "We're going on holiday to France, aren't we?"

Emma nodded. "Yep. Only for a fortnight this year, sadly."

"Do you... erm..."

"Hermione, spit it out." Emma said, her mind suddenly lowering itself to the gutter as she thought of her daughter's relationship with Harry. She only hoped that piece of advice wouldn't be necessary for a while.

“Do you... could Harry come with us?” She asked tentatively. “He said he’s never been on holiday before. His relatives always left him with a neighbour whenever they went on trips or holidays.”

Emma fumed inside for a moment. Some of her best memories were her childhood holidays. “I’ll have to ask your Dad, but I don’t have a problem with it.”

“Can we ask him now?” Hermione asked, near-bouncing in her seat.

“Sure.” Emma shrugged, walking to the doorway. “Dan!” She shouted.

“Yeah?” Dan said, from right next to the door, causing his wife to jump.

“Jesus, don’t do that!” Emma scolded him, before swatting at his arm. “Damn it, Dan, I’ve told you about that before.”

He shrugged, grinning impishly at Hermione behind Emma’s back. She just rolled her eyes at her parents’ antics. “Daddy, can we take Harry with us when we go to France?”

Dan thought over the details of their holiday. “Not easily, princess.” He replied. “The hotel’s booked, as is the flight.” He noticed the disappointed look on his daughter’s face. “I’m sure, though, we could book him a flight, and see if the hotel has another room available.”

Hermione’s face lit up. It was both comforting and disturbing for Dan Granger; comforting, because his daughter was happy, and disturbing, because it was over a boy, irrespective of the fact that Dan liked the kid.

“Why don’t you ask Harry, sweetie?” Emma said. “I’m sure you carry your mirror around with you, wherever you go.”

With a sheepish smile, Hermione reached into the back pocket of her jeans, pulling out the little communication device. “Harry Potter!”

Harry woke up to hear his mirror chiming. With a grunt, and several swear words, he rolled over, wincing as a crick in his neck straightened itself out. I am never sleeping on the bloody floor again. "Accept." He told his communication mirror. "Hey, Hermione. What's up?"

"Are you all right?" She asked him. "You look... untidy."

"Fell asleep on the floor. Was working on my project. As soon as I get the stuff from the goblins, I can put it together."

"Huh. Okay... anyway, I was just asking my parents about you joining us on holiday. You said you've never been on holiday before."

Harry was shocked by his future-wife's thoughtfulness. "No... I haven't." He said slowly. "But... wouldn't it have already been booked?"

The mirror shifted positions, the sudden change making Harry a bit dizzy. "Harry?"

"Mr. Granger. Morning, sir."

"Good morning. Now, we're staying at the Victoria Palace Hotel, in the centre of Paris. I'll have to check to see if they have rooms available. Do you have a passport?"

Harry shook his head. "No, but that may not be necessary. If you can provide me with co-ordinates, I should be able to Apparate there. Also, with regards to the Hotel, the Goblins own the penthouse suites in a number of hotels around the world. It's possible that they can book it for me."

Dan sucked air through his teeth. "That would be very expensive, Harry. The Victoria's a 5-star hotel."

"Sir, in the last ten months, the Goblins have made investments earning me nearly five hundred thousand pounds. Not to mention money that was made while I was staying at my relatives. I can swing this, easily, sir."

Dan just looked at him curiously. "You made half a million pounds in less than a year?"

"Yep. Not to mention, I only pay one and a half percent in income tax. Two percent on Muggle-based income. Should be able to afford a week in France."

"Fortnight." Dan corrected quickly. "Anyway, we're actually setting off the day after tomorrow."

"Cool." Harry replied, already composing the missive he'd send to Gringotts. "This is gonna be the best summer ever."

(1) Mercury became One-2-One, who later became T-Mobile

(2) Cellnet became BT-Cellnet, then O2.

(3) I used to work for DSG, the company that owns PC World, so I know how awful the sales reps are... I used to be one.

Author's Response:

Will this be a Harry/Many story?

No. This is strictly Harmonian. They will never date anyone else.

They're only twelve. Isn't that too early for them to start dating?

What exactly do you think I'm gonna have them doing? I admit, it's been a while since I was 12, but they're not exactly gonna start making babies. They won't do anything too naughty until they hit the age of consent. (I'm British, and it's 16 in this country) So, there may be touching, groping et cetera, but nothing too naughty. For second year, they'll be kissing, but I doubt they'll even use tongues.

Don't Give them Weapons!

This is probably the most common review I got for chapter 22. I have no intention of turning them into the Punisher. They're witches and

wizards (technically, witches and sorcerers, since they need the use of a magically-infused focus, instead of directing their energies by mental command alone), and this is what they will focus on. However, using a SPAS 12 when faced with a large number of Inferi could be useful. That's the sort of thing I was thinking of using. Maybe they could use handguns if they're ever on a mission in the Muggle world. Still, first and foremost, they are magic wielders.

What's happening with Dumbledore?

Odd, isn't it? Dumbledore's not, repeat not evil in this fic. However, he is manipulative. Having read OotP and HBP, I don't see how people can't think he's manipulative. His plan, basically, involves moulding Harry into the perfect weapon, and staying with the Dursleys is part of that. Draco Malfoy, arrogant and strutting, would make a very poor BWL. By having Harry be humble and self-sacrificing, he'd be willing to do whatever was necessary, even sacrificing his own life.

Dumbledore will learn, eventually, but until then, he will continue to try, and fail to control young Mr. Potter.

What's happening with Snape?

I've got a story in the works where Snape turns good. This is not it. I like evil!Snape. Not just git!Snape, but evil!Snape. He will not be redeemed. He will fight for the darkness. Just 'cause it's fun.

What are the other ships gonna be?

Tell you the truth, I haven't decided yet. There is a possibility of same sex pairings, but only 'cause sexuality is largely irrelevant to me. According to recent polls, ten percent of the population is homosexual. So, in a school of four hundred (as established earlier in the story) forty people will be gay. Some of those, however, will not act on it, 'cause of the ancient customs in the Wizarding world. However, some will.

How can Harry have muscles at the end of first year, if he's been abused all his life?

I love this question, and have come up with the perfect answer. After ten months of good food and good exercise, he'd make a marvellous improvement. Look at Tobey McGuire from the first Spider-Man film. Just before he gets bitten by the spider, he's a skinny runt. After his DNA gets rewritten, he's ripped. Same with Harry. I seriously doubt it took ten months for Tobey to improve, either. (The person who asked me about Harry being able to 'nurse a semi' at eleven years old... are you female? 'Cause trust me, an eleven year old could. Possibly even earlier. However, it wouldn't quite... be all there.)

Some things happened later in real-life than they did in this story.

Okay, so I'm tinkering with the timeline a little. For example, certain Windows operating systems will be available before their actual date. Certain technologies (notably cell-phones, laptops, TVs and DVDs) will be available sooner. Why? 'Cause I damned well said so.

Will you be following Canon?

Up to a point, yes. I'll follow canon up to and including fourth year, 'cause I need Voldemort resurrecting. After that, though, it's gonna be fair game. However, this story should be a lot darker, which means there will be fatalities that weren't in canon, as well as minor side-events. On a side note, I couldn't not include Lockhart. He's just too good a character to ignore!

– CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE –

Alliances and Celebrations

Harry dropped his suitcase on the floor, and fell onto the couch, near tears. Okay... I am never going to go on holiday with her again! He groused. He knew, however, that he was lying, and would happily go again next year. Hell, next week, if it's a chance to spend time with my Hermione.

With a sigh, he hauled himself to his feet, grabbing his suitcase, and heading to the bedroom. He opened his laundry hamper, and threw in the dirty clothes from his trip.

This is one of the best Wizarding inventions ever. The hamper was far more than just a storage basket for dirty clothes. It actually washed them, ironed them, and aired them, so they were ready for use again. It took less than an hour to wash and dry every piece of clothing he owned.

While he was waiting for the wash to be finished, he lay lazily on his bed, watching the hamper, and cast his mind back over the trip.

He sat down on the bank, letting his legs dangle in the breeze. Next to him, his girlfriend sat down daintily, not wanting to let her skirt ride up. She took his hand, and rested her head against his shoulder.

"This is nice, Harry." She murmured.

The two had been walking along the River Seine, hand-in-hand, for several hours, looking at the various sites and attractions. Hermione's hand hadn't left his, unless she was pointing something out, or gesticulating wildly as she educated him with regards to something French. It had come as a shock to the Grangers when they found out Harry spoke fluent French. (He actually didn't, he just knew a really useful translation spell, which allowed him to switch between languages instantly.)

"It is." He said back to her, squeezing her hand gently. "Thank you, Hermione."

Her head tilted slightly as she looked up at him. "What for?"

He kissed her forehead softly. "For thinking of me. For arranging with your parents to share your family holiday with me."

Hermione smiled warmly, and snuggled back down next to him. Somehow, I think you may end up as family, Harry. Or, at least... I hope you do. She thought, as the two watched the sun begin to set.

For two hours, they watched the sky darken, before turning gold, then a deep red, before the stars came out. The two sat together, under the stars...

Harry pulled the first load of washing from the hamper, puttering around his bedroom as he put it away. Christ, I hate this part... He bitched to himself, and he started pairing up his socks. As he carried on the mindless task, another memory surfaced...

Hermione's scream was loud in the alley. The L'Allée Commerciale Magique (Magical Shopping Alley) was larger than Diagon Alley, but not nearly as populated. However, it linked in to several magical wildlife preserves, allowing the residents and tourists in magical Paris to use the LCM as a base for tours and shopping.

One of the creatures of Le Centre d'Etude de Créature Magique Dangereux (Dangerous Magical Creature Study Centre) had managed to break free, and began a rampage through the LCM. Harry heard Hermione's scream and instantly turned and ran towards the sound, irrespective of the possible danger. She was his, and he wouldn't let anyone or anything touch her!

As he turned the corner, he saw the problem; a Lethifold. The dark creature sailed over the floor, heading straight for the panicking Miss Granger. Harry charged forward, placing himself between Hermione and the Lethifold.

"Harry, run!" Hermione cried out. "It's a Lethifold!"

I know! Harry thought. He quickly glanced over his shoulder, seeing his girlfriend cower, and it stoked the fires of rage in him. Nothing had the right to make Hermione cower. He winked at her, and cast a wandless Somnus charm on Hermione, causing her to fall asleep. He didn't want her to see the next part. As soon as her head slumped, Harry looked round, seeing the area was clear.

He raised his wand, aiming it at the Lethifold. "Prongs!" He shouted, summoning his Patronus. He'd long abandoned shouting the traditional incantation, since it was six syllables long, and often that could be the difference between forming a Patronus, and being kissed by a Dementor or eaten by a Lethifold.

Prongs erupted from the wand, the Lethifold instinctively stopping when it sensed the powerful protector. "Get it!" Harry shouted at the stag, which charged forward, spearing the dark creature with his antlers, before turning back to Harry for orders. Above him, Harry heard a shriek, as his familiar entered the Alley, preparing for battle.

"Take it down there!" Harry pointed at the path that led to Le Centre. Prongs charged forward, running the creature back to its home. He turned back to Hermione, casting an Enervate on her, to wake her up.

She opened her eyes in panic, before she noticed the Lethifold was gone. "Harry? What happened? Where did it go?"

Harry pulled her into his arms, comforting her for a few moments. "It's gone, now." He said softly. "Some kind of... of glowing animal pushed it away." It wasn't, after all, a lie.

"It must have been a Patronus." Hermione said. "I've read about them. It's the only thing that can repel a Lethifold. Did you see who cast it?"

"No." Harry replied. "Must have been just out of my sight." Which isn't a lie. I can't see myself. "Still, it's gone now. I think we should be getting back to the hotel."

Harry threw the socks into the drawer, and bundled the next lot of washing into the hamper. It groaned for a moment, before the clothes started churning their way through another cycle.

"Well, what do you think of Paris so far, Harry?" Dan asked, leaning back in his chair.

"It's brilliant, Mr. Granger." Harry replied earnestly. "I've never been on holiday to France. Thank you for including me."

"Oh, we couldn't leave you behind, Harry." Emma said, glancing slyly at Hermione, who blushed prettily under her mother's gaze. "Hermione would've been miserable the entire time."

"Mum!" Hermione whined, glancing at Harry and smiling apologetically.

"No, seriously, I'm really grateful that'd disrupt your holiday for me." Harry said, smiling shyly at the adult Grangers.

Dinner came, and the foursome sat eating, drinking, laughing and just enjoying each other's company. It was a memory that Harry would treasure for a long time...

Harry made himself some dinner, a Steak and Kidney pie with real gravy and mash, before settling down with one of Lockhart's books, which he knew he'd need for the next year.

Hedwig barked upon her entrance, telling him that she had mail. Harry looked up, seeing his familiar enter the flat. "Hey, girl. Good hunting?" She hooted at him. "Well, don't bring it back, please. Mice and rats are one thing, but I don't wanna see any dead frogs, understand?"

She hooted again mournfully. "Stop it." He moaned. Hedwig hooted smugly. "Yes, I know I'm wrapped round your bloody talon. You don't need to make a big deal out of it."

With the suspicious bark/snuffle hoot of laughter, Hedwig held out her leg for her minion to remove his post. "I am not your minion." Harry replied. "Remember, I'm the master, you're the pet?"

She snuffled at him. "Okay, familiar, not pet. Happy, now?" Hedwig hooted in satisfaction, before flying out of the window. He shook his head, before glancing down at the letter, in the spiky writing of the goblins. He glanced at it; a reminder that his metal was available, and 1,287 galleons had been removed from his vault, 287 for materials, and the 1,000 tip he'd offered for quick delivery.

He sent a letter back, instructing the goblins to wait a day for him to reinforce the floor of his flat, and then he'd pop into the start shifting it by Portkey. He quickly made the changes to the expansion charm on the building, allowing it to hold the immense weight of his new alloy.

He'd send it back with Hedwig when she returned from her excursion. While waiting for her, he tinkered with the expansion charm, deciding to add himself a balcony. It required little time and effort, and the inherent magic created the railing and changed the wall and window into an appropriate patio door.

He'd go tomorrow, noticing idly that it would be July 31st. The date didn't mean anything for him.

His visit to the goblins went smoothly. They'd start moving the metal tomorrow, making sure Harry could begin his work on his Portkey research quite quickly. He ambled along Diagon Alley, popping into shops to see if there was anything that struck his fancy. Nothing did, so he carried on home.

He opened the door, clambering the stairs slowly. He yawned as he climbed, feeling particularly lazy and lethargic. He opened the door, stepping into his flat."

"Surprise!" A cacophony of voices yelled in unison. One nanosecond later, his wand was in hand, and a bright red wave of energy flooded into the room as he dived for cover behind the couch.

When the flash blindness cleared, Harry looked at his victims. "Shit."

"You know," Emma said dryly, "when people gather for your birthday, leap out of nowhere and yell 'surprise', it's not meant to be an instruction, Harry." After seeing what looked like half of Hogwarts

lying unconscious in his living room, Harry had sheepishly enervated them.

Harry lowered his head. "I... I didn't know." He said softly. "A group of people leap out of nowhere at me screaming... what was I supposed to think?"

"Well, you're supposed to think it's a surprise party for your birthday, Harry." Hermione said from his side.

"Oh." Harry looked at his hands. "I'll take your word for that."

"Haven't you had a surprise party before?" One of the twins asked.

Harry shook his head.

"Oh? Did the Dursleys always tell you beforehand?" Dumbledore asked.

"No, sir. The Dursleys have never celebrated my birthday. I didn't even know when it was until I was seven."

Harry could almost feel the frosty glares being bandied about the room. "What about presents?" Hermione asked him. "Have you got presents before?"

"Just one." Harry replied, a note of happiness in his voice.

"What was it?" Asked a harsh-sounding McGonagall.

As if on cue, the fluttering of wings announced Hedwig's arrival, as she sailed into the flat, landing neatly on Harry's shoulder. "Hey, baby." Harry said, reaching up to scratch her chest.

"Just 'er, Harry?" Hagrid asked. "Just the gift I bough' ye?"

"Yes." He looked up at Hagrid for a moment. "Don't take this the wrong way, but how did you get in, Hagrid? You're too tall to fit through the door."

“Professor Dumbledore raised it up for me.” Hagrid replied. “So, let me un’erstand... the Dursleys never bought you a present, or a cake, or anything like that?”

Harry nodded. The sounds of a scuffle and a squeal caught Harry’s attention. Glancing round, he saw McGonagall and Pomfrey dragging Dumbledore by his ears to the small landing at the top of the stairs, before shutting the door. Harry grinned at the thought of the ‘greatest wizard in the world’ being reamed out by two grandmother-types.

“You’ve never even had a birthday cake?” The other twin asked.

“Yeah, I have!” Harry replied, again looking at Hagrid, who promptly burst into tears.

“Moving on...” Hermione said, passing a napkin up to the half-giant, wincing as he blew his nose. The noise startled poor Hedwig, who jumped six inches into the air, before landing neatly on Harry shoulder. The door from the landing opened, with McGonagall and Pomfrey coming back in, followed by a chagrined-looking Dumbledore. “Anyway, let’s light the candles, and sing the song.” Emma reappeared from the kitchen, a large slab cake on a tray in front of her, with twelve burning candles.

The group, comprising of Professors Flitwick, McGonagall and Dumbledore, Madame Pomfrey, Fred, George, Dan, Emma, Hermione, Blaise, Neville, Padma, Susan and Tonks, began to sing heartily. Harry winced as the twins mangled the birthday song into something unintelligible.

When they finished, Harry stared at the cake, the candles burning merrily, before he looked up. “Er... what now?”

Muttering under her breath for a moment, Hermione took his hand. “Blow out the candles, Harry. Just before you blow, you make a wish.”

“Oh. Why?” He asked her.

“Just do it, Harry.” Hermione said warily. “It’s tradition.”

Harry took a deep breath, blowing out all twelve candles, before grabbing the serving knife and neatly slicing the cake.

Hermione cleared her throat. "If no-one has any plans for the rest of the afternoon, I propose we go and find some suitably rusty garden tools and eviscerate his relatives. Any takers?"

McGonagall, Pomfrey and Hagrid immediately raised their hands, followed by the elder Grangers and Susan.

"There's no need for that." Harry said reprovingly. Hermione glared at him. "I'd much rather peel their skin off and cover them in salt." Hermione's glare vanished, to be replaced by a warm smile. "Seriously, it's done with. I'm out of there." He noticed the sombre mood. "Anyway, this is supposed to be a birthday party!"

The group smiled at his boyish enthusiasm, but faltered at his next words. "What now?"

"Presents!" The two Weasleys shouted, before throwing a package at him. Harry, fully aware of the Weasleys predilection for pranks, ducked neatly out of the way, allowing the package to sail past, before he snagged it with a levitation charm.

"Don't you trust us, Harry?" Fred asked with mock-hurt.

"That's hurts, 'ickle Harrikins." George added, sniffing loudly.

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment. "When it comes to gifts and/or food, lads, I trust you as much as I trust Snape. In a fight... I'd trust you with my life." He replied simply. The twins blinked for a moment, before grinning maniacally at Harry. He looked at the floating package for a moment, before flicking his wand, vanishing the wrapping paper.

Inside the box was a collection of Video tapes. He inspected closer; a series of comedy stand-up videos, as well as several how-to-prank tapes. He looked up at the Twins and nodded, smiling warmly. "I'm sure we could find a use for these, gentlemen."

He received a bulkier package from the Grangers, and ripped off the wrapping paper. Oh, my... Inside the box was the pinnacle of gaming technology; a Sony Playstation. There was another package, handed to him by Hermione, which contained a game. He ripped open the packaging to find Time Crisis, and a pistol controller. "Cool!" He said, wrapping Hermione in a hug, before turning on her parents. A tight hug from Emma, and a manly handshake from Dan later, he turned to find tiny Professor Flitwick holding out another package.

"I hope you don't have this one." He said. Harry took the package, ripping off the paper. Inside was a thin, flat plastic case.

"Ooh, a DVD." Harry said impressively. He looked closer at the title. "Goldeneye!(1) Thanks, Professor!"

"According to Minerva, it's only been released on that... thing, for the last couple of weeks." Flitwick said. "Do you have one of those DDV players?"

Harry shook his head. "No, sir."

"Thank goodness." McGonagall said, passing over yet another package. Harry looked at the tag, noting that this was a combined present from McGonagall and Pomfrey. Ripping off the packaging, I could really get used to being a kid again... he thought to himself, he saw a boxed-up DVD player. "This is brilliant!" He wrapped the startled McGonagall into a hug, before attacking Pomfrey. "Thank you."

Neville cleared his throat nervously, before handing over a large, unwrapped box. "I-I was told you lived alone, so I thought this would be nice for your house." Harry tore open the box, stepping back as something tried to grab him.

"It's a Venomous Tentacular." Neville said. "As long as it's kept fed, it's quite harmless."

Harry looked up uncertainly, before nodding. He'd have to set a ward around it to make sure it didn't try and kill him in his sleep... Blaise,

Susan and Padma passed him yet another package. "This is from all three of us." Susan explained.

Inside the box was a set of Quidditch goggles, a pair of high-resistant arm guards (Guaranteed to stop a Bludger, or your money back!) and a Quidditch support strap, designed to protect male anatomy while riding a broom. "Cool." Harry said, smiling at his friends. "These, combined with the armour Hermione got me for Christmas, should make me the best protected player on the pitch!"

Tonks passed over a small package. "'Cause I'm going in for Auror training, I was told to get one of these. You should have one, too." Inside was a wand holster, and a tube of polish.

Harry couldn't help himself. "Thanks, Tonks. Are you saying I should polish my wand more?" He grinned cheekily at her. She blushed, her hair turning red.

Hagrid was next, passing over a very familiar photo album. "I was gonna give that to you at the end of the term, Harry, but I was still waiting for a couple of people to respond. It's an album of your parents." Harry opened the book, seeing his parents looking up at him, waving and smiling as they held a tiny baby.

He looked up. "Thanks, Hagrid." Harry said in a thick voice. "You... you don't know what this means to me."

"Harry, my boy, I have your last present." Dumbledore said, passing over a thick package. Harry opened the paper, revealing a heavy book, *A History of Dark Wizards and their Downfalls*. Harry looked up at the old man. "I do believe you and your parents are mentioned in that book."

Harry thanked everyone again, gathering up the presents and taking them to his room, so they could be put away properly. While in there, he sat on his bed, a few tears leaking from his eyes. Even with his extra century of life, he'd never felt so touched as he had by all these people providing him with gifts.

“Hey.” Hermione came into the room, and set next to him, wrapping him in a hug. “What’s wrong, Harry?” She asked softly.

“It’s... I’ve never got presents like this, before.” He replied, equally softly. “I’m...”

“Shh...” Hermione whispered. “Come on, let’s get back to the party.”

The afternoon wore on with pranks from the twins, jokes, conversations, laughter, joy, and a seemingly endless supply of lemon drops from Dumbledore.

Harry took a few moments to himself, stepping through the patio doors onto his new balcony, watching the people amble about in Diagon Alley. The Fidelius charm extended out here, so he could watch them, while they could not see into his flat. Hedwig had followed him, sitting on the railing while she watched her pet wizard.

In the background, someone had put on his wireless, leading to the ladies dancing, while the gentlemen sat and watched, drinking Butterbeer.

“Harry?” A voice called from behind him. “Are you okay?”

“No.” Harry replied, his voice much lower than usual. “There is a storm coming, Emma... a black and terrible storm. The Flight of Death will return, and death will stalk the land.” He turned round, his eyes glowing a bright green. Hedwig, still sitting on the railing, turned to face the room. Even more shocking than Harry’s eyes were Hedwig’s, which were also glowing.

“H-Harry?” Emma stammered, noticing absently that every eye in the room was locked onto Harry and Hedwig. The music vanished from the background.

“The Flight of Death will return.” He repeated. “The Snake Lord will gather his flock, and launch the Second War.”

“Is this a prophecy?” McGonagall asked Dumbledore quietly.

"No." Harry said, drawing back all the eyes in the room. "This is a memory, a history of things yet to come."

In a castle in Northern Scotland, a woman, sitting alone in the top room of the tallest tower, stared into a crystal ball. She stiffened as destiny and fate spoke through her. "My prophecy stands, the Chosen One walks amongst you, yet he cannot fight alone. The seven must unite as one. Six stand together, yet the Moon child's visions will complete them."

Trelawney shook her head, clearing her throat. "I need a cough drop." She muttered, as she stared into the ball.

Harry's eyes faded. He looked around the room. "Er... hi?"

"What was that?" Hermione asked instantly.

"I don't know." Harry lied, before he looked at Emma. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs. Granger. I shouldn't have called you by your first name."

"Not a problem, Harry." Emma said uneasily. "At the moment, I don't care. What was that? A vision?"

"Of sorts." Harry replied. "Voldemort's not dead, is he, Professor?"

"I don't believe so, Harry." Dumbledore said heavily. "He was only banished that Halloween, not killed. I do believe his return to be inevitable."

"So, what do we do?" McGonagall asked. "Albus, what do we do?"

"We have two options." Harry said firmly. "We can run away, hide until it's all over."

Dumbledore watched Harry, knowing instinctively that the boy wouldn't do that. He was far too much of a Gryffindor to considering running.

“Second option... we fight.” Harry watched Dan and Emma pale at the thought of their baby girl involved in a Wizarding war. “Me... I’m gonna fight.”

“Fight.” Neville said firmly.

“Fight.” Padma added.

Susan looked around before sighing. “Fight.”

“Fight.” Blaise spoke quietly, but just as firmly as Neville.

“Fight.” Tonks said. “I’m gonna be an Auror... I can’t just walk away.

“He’ll be coming after our family.” Fred and George said together. “We’ll fight.”

“Fight.” Hermione concluded.

“Hermione?” Dan asked. “This is dangerous. You’re too young to want to fight.”

“I don’t believe it will be a case of ‘want’ to fight, Mr. Granger.” Dumbledore said. “Voldemort has never concerned himself with the age of his opponents. His trying to kill Harry as a one-year old baby proves that. If a second war starts, everyone will be involved, regardless of their ages. Voldemort does not take prisoners.”

Emma asked the question no-one else was really prepared to ask. “When, Harry?”

Harry’s, and Hedwig’s, eyes glowed again for a moment. “We have time. Not much, but a little.” His eyes faded. “We will, however, need training.” He turned to his friends. “Do you trust me?” They nodded as one. “Then, we’ll begin when we get back to school.”

“Training, Harry?” Dumbledore asked. “What training will you be giving?”

Harry slumped back in his chair, Hedwig settling onto his shoulder. "I think starting with Occlumency will be a brilliant start."

"You know Occlumency?" The old man asked.

"Yes, as well you know, Professor." Harry retorted. "It'll also help keep Snape under control." He sniffed. "Greasy bastard thinks he should be able to rummage around in my head." He muttered to Hedwig, who hooted comfortingly.

"How developed are you?" Dumbledore asked. "Can you repel a full-strength attack?"

Harry grinned. "Why don't you come and take a look?"

Dumbledore's wand was in hand in an instant. "Legilimens!" His eyes glazed over as his mind vanished from his body for a moment. "Astounding..." He said after a moment, his eyes twinkling furiously. "Where is your mind, Harry?"

Fred and George opened their mouths to comment, before realising that pissing off the powerhouse known as Harry Potter was not the smartest career move they could make, and their jaws clamped shut.

"I could not find your mind. All I could see was stars..." Dumbledore finished.

"Where better to hide your mind than the infinite abyss known as space, Professor?" He grinned cheekily. "I have a full mindscape set up. Snape tried to attack me before the end of term, but he couldn't do anything."

McGonagall's lips thinned for a few moments. "I'll be having a word with Severus..."

Harry just shrugged. "Anyway... this is a party! Let's leave the depressing stuff alone for a while." He grabbed a Butterbeer, and waved his wand at the wireless.

The party had resumed, but it was still a tense group. Harry's 'prediction' had thrown a bit of a downer over all concerned. Fred and George, in an attempt to cheer the group up, had offered to hold some pick-up Quidditch games at the Burrow, inviting everyone.

The group had left, except for the Grangers, who were trying to help Harry clear up his flat.

"Harry?" Hermione asked quietly, holding the bin bag Harry was tipping rubbish into.

"Yeah?"

She fidgeted for a moment. "Can we win?"

"You wouldn't accept anything less, My Only." Harry replied. "We will win." He promised. "Nothing is guaranteed, but I promise, I'll win for you."

She smiled at him, and went back to cleaning up.

The following day, Harry decided what he wanted to get Hermione for her birthday in September. He wasn't sure it would be available at the present time, since she hadn't originally got it since third year. He made his way to the Magical Menagerie, stepping in tentatively.

He glanced around, looking for a particular animal. Not seeing him, he made his way to the counter. "Help you there, bud?" A gruff voice asked.

Harry looked up to see a very pretty young lady stood in front of him, the source of the gruff voice. Odd... "Er... yes, you can, actually. I'm looking for a pet for a friend of mine."

"Girl?" The gruff voice asked. Harry watched her for a moment, wondering how the hell a pretty girl sounded like a fifty-a-day Canadian male smoker, but just nodded.

"Yeah. She likes cats, so I was wondering if you had any cats or Kneazles available."

"No Kneazles, boy." The woman replied. "Got a half-Kneazle. Powerful ugly creature, though."

Ah... must be Crookshanks. Harry thought, nodding at the weird storekeeper. The girl sighed heavily, before walking to the back. Harry glanced around the store absently, before he heard an angry hiss, and cussing from the girl. "...little bastard! Get back here..." An angry mew announced Crookshanks' capture, as the girl stomped out angrily, a large scratch down the side of her face.

Harry looked at the struggling creature in her arms, noting happily that it was indeed the formidable Crookshanks. As soon as the animal saw Harry, he settled down. He knew that this ugly little human was going to take him to where he needed to be.

"How much?" Harry asked.

"You can have the little bugger for free if you get it out of my bloody shop!" The sales assistant said bitterly, near-throwing the part-Kneazle onto Harry.

"Does he have a name?" Harry asked, picking Crooks' up carefully, resting him on his arms.

"It's called 'Crookshanks'. Don't ask me why, I don't bloody know, or care, really. Now, please take it away!"

Harry left the store with Crookshanks in his arms, heading straight back to his flat. "What do you say, boy? Get you some tuna and a comfy pillow?" Crooks mewed happily. Harry could almost hear the cat in his mind. Finally, a human who knows how to treat a cat.

After dropping the cat off at his flat, and spending almost forty minutes reassuring Hedwig that he wasn't replacing her, the cat was a gift for Hermione, he popped out into Muggle London, heading for a pet store to pick up the necessities, including a carrier.

Upon his return to his flat, Harry repaired both couches and three sets of curtains, which had been used as a scratching post by the cat,

Scourgified the puddle of pee off the floor, and picked up the Venomous Tentacular, which had been upended, and was flailing about trying to hit Crookshanks.

Harry opened the carrier, putting in some Tuna, in an attempt to lure the evil animal inside. Crooks, on the other hand, just looked at Harry, as though saying do you really think I'm that stupid? Harry just levitated the cat inside, slamming the door behind him. Crookshanks turned round and pressed his face against the bars, looking pitifully at Harry.

On her perch, Hedwig snuffled loudly, laughing at the poor feline. Harry growled at her until she shut up, then headed to the communication mirror on the wall.

"Hermione Granger!" A few moments later, his girlfriend's face was in front of him.

"Hey, Harry. What's up?"

"Hi, gorgeous." Harry replied, watching her blush in embarrassment, as she did whenever he said that to her. "I was wondering if I could pop over today. I've got you a birthday present, but I need to deliver it straight away."

"It's not my birthday for another seven weeks, Harry." Hermione replied, grinning at him. "But, I suppose if you must get me a present..."

"Would you like me to take it back?" Harry asked.

"No!" She replied quickly, before smiling. "Not at all, Harry."

"I'll be over shortly." He blew her a kiss, grinning as she blushed again.

Harry had grabbed the carrier and the bag containing the supplies, and apparated up to Hermione's house, landing in the back garden. He walked towards the door, but didn't even get the chance to knock

as it was flung open by a bushy brown-haired missile, who flung herself onto Harry.

“Hello.” Harry gurgled into her hair, as she attempted break his ribs by excessive hugging. She looked up at him, and planted a chaste kiss on his lips.

“Hi.” She said shyly, before unwrapping her arms.

“Like I said,” Harry said, holding up the carrier, “I picked out a birthday present for you, and I get the feeling he’d rather be with you than me.”

Hermione pulled him into the house, setting herself onto the couch in the living room. Harry gleefully passed the carrier containing the spitting Crookshanks, who looked decidedly annoyed at being confined.

He opened the door, letting the irritated half-Kneazle rush out, before looking around the room, and leaping onto Hermione’s lap. Hermione, predictably, fell instantly in love.

“Oh, he’s so cute!” She squealed.

Dan came into the living room, and stopped in his tracks when he saw the cat on his daughter’s lap. He sat on the other couch, next to Harry. “Afternoon, Harry.”

“Hi, Mr. Granger.”

“What’s that?” Dan asked, pointing at Crookshanks.

“It’s a cat, Mr. Granger.” Harry said slowly, looking at his soon-to-be-father-in-law.

“Huh.” Dan replied, leaning back on the couch. “You picked it out for her?” Harry nodded. “Couldn’t you have found a cat that actually looks like a cat?” Harry, wisely, said nothing. “I mean... god damn, that’s one ugly animal.”

Crookshanks looked up and hissed at Dan.

"He's actually only half-cat. The other half's a creature called a Kneazle, and they're very intelligent. To the point of understanding human speech. And his name's Crookshanks."

Dan shrugged. "Still a bloody ugly animal."

"Stop it, Dad." Hermione said, pulling Crookshanks closer for a hug. "He's very pretty, aren't you, Crookshanks?"

Harry glanced at Dan and shook his head minutely. It was a look that was recognised by men all over the world, and it said one word: 'women'. He shrugged, and picked up the bag. "Anyway, got all his bits here, food, bowls, toys," he glared at Crooks, "scratching post, young man."

"Oh... did he damage something at your place?" Hermione asked, still not looking up from the ugly little critter.

"Both couches, three sets of curtains, the new plant, and he peed on my floor." Harry replied.

"I'm sure he was just nervous, weren't you?" She cooed to the cat, who grinned smugly at Harry.

"Be nice, Crooks." Harry said sternly. "Don't forget, I rescued you from that bloody pet shop." He glared at the cat, before looking at Hermione. "Want to try something, Hermione. Concentrate on your magic, let it fill you, then look at Crooks."

Hermione closed her eyes, concentrating on feeling her magic, before she opened her eyes and looked at the animal. She felt... something tickling at the back of her mind. "What's... Harry?"

"I thought so. He's starting to bond with you as a familiar. He won't just be a pet, but your magical partner."

"Huh."

Harry apparated Emma, Dan and Hermione to the border of the Weasley property, opting to appear at the end of the drive, instead of near the house.

Perched on his shoulder was Hedwig, while Hermione held the evil hissing demon... er, Crookshanks, in her arms. As soon as the quartet landed, Crookshanks wriggled until he was put down, upon which he charged forward, presumably going to pick on the gnomes that frequented the Burrow.

They started walking up the path, making sure to talk loud enough so that people would hear them approaching, the three newcomers to the Burrow looking at it oddly.

"How is that building still standing?" Emma whispered to Harry.

"Magic." Harry grinned.

Upon knocking on the door, the group found themselves bustled into the kitchen, being offered tea and cake from Molly.

"Well, look at you!" Molly said to Harry. "You look an awful lot like your father, Harry. Apart from the eyes. You've got your mother's eyes."

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. In his long life, he'd heard that bloody phrase so often, he was utterly sick of it. "Thank you, Mrs. Weasley. You have a lovely home."

"Oh, thank you." Molly blushed. She started pouring the tea for her guests. "Now, Fred and George said that they'd invited you round for some Quidditch." She looked at Hermione. "Will you be playing too, dear?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. I'm not very good, though."

Molly just smiled. "That doesn't really matter, dear. Just as long as you have fun playing."

The Weasleys had quickly gathered themselves upon hearing the announcement of a Quidditch game. Percy had decided to join in, since he hadn't played for quite a while. When Ron entered the kitchen, though, he sneered at Harry.

"Potter, what are you doing at my house?"

"Ronald!" Molly chastised.

Harry looked up coolly. "Fred and George invited us over for some Quidditch."

"Well, don't think you're using my broom!" He snapped, before turning away, and stalking outside.

"Charming." Hermione deadpanned.

"I'm sorry, Harry, Hermione." Molly said. "I don't know what's got into him."

Jealousy, rage, feelings of inadequacy... you name it. Harry thought. He looked up as he heard a squeak. Ginny. Good, let's keep up the crush and embarrassment, and save us both a load of trouble. She saw him looking at her, and dashed up the stairs.

Molly looked over at Harry, blushing. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with everyone today."

"It's fine, Mrs. Weasley." Harry said. "Anyway, if we can get one more person, we could get a three-on-three going, or even four-on-four if the Grangers want to play."

"Could we?" Dan asked. "I didn't know Muggles could fly brooms."

Harry nodded. "They can, because the magic's in the broom, not the person. But, with all due respect, you wouldn't be able to fly as well or as fast as a magical person, 'cause their magic augments the broom's magic."

"Really?" Molly asked. "I've never heard of that."

"Yeah." Harry replied. "Say, for example, my broom's top speed is 100mph. I could probably squeeze 105, maybe 110 out of it. Same for Hermione. But, Mr. and Mrs. Granger may only get 85 to 90 out of it."

"Cool!" Dan drained his tea, before standing up. "I will admit, I've been wondering about this. Hermione told me about your games, but I didn't think I'd ever see it, never mind play it."

"Fred?" Harry asked. "Do you think you could get Ron or Ginny to play?"

Fred glanced at George, who shrugged. "Probably not, mate. He doesn't really like you, and Ginny doesn't play Quidditch."

"Ah." Harry turned to Molly, who glanced at her hands, before looking up.

"It's been a long time since I played, Harry." She said slowly. She noted the pleading expressions on Fred's, George's and Percy's face, along with a warm smile from Harry and Hermione. "Oh, all right."

The group of eight piled outside. Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out a small wooden case, about the size of a packet of cigarettes. He pulled out a tiny broom, about three inches long, which he passed to Hermione. He did the same for Dan and Emma, then pulled his Nimbus out. With a tap of his wand, all four brooms became full size.

"Where did you get these from?" Hermione asked.

"I rented them from Quality Quidditch Supplies this morning." Harry replied. "I'll take 'em back tomorrow."

"Teams!" Fred shouted, before he thought. "Are we having Bludgers?"

"Best not." Harry replied. "Don't want to chance it. Quaffle and Snitch?"

The group of eight quickly divided into two teams; Harry, Fred, Hermione and Dan vs. Emma, Molly, Percy and George.

The group ran through some basic exercises, teaching Dan and Emma how to control their brooms, then how to play a basic game of Quidditch. Percy decided to play seeker opposite Harry, while Fred and George went in goal.

“First to 200?” Harry shouted, getting generally favourable responses.

The game lasted for several hours, earning a couple of rude shouts from Ron Weasley’s bedroom whenever one of the slower players floated past.

After Harry caught the snitch, earning his team 150 points, the group landed, and head back inside the house.

“That was fun, Harry!” Dan exclaimed, a huge grin on his face. “We have to do that again sometime!”

“You’re welcome to come round whenever you want.” Molly offered. “Maybe this weekend, when my husband’s home.”

“No!” Fred and George shouted together. “You can’t!”

Molly’s eyebrow arched up. “And why not, young men?”

“Because, Mum, Dad’ll nag ‘em to death about being Muggles. Don’t you remember his latest crusade? ‘What’s the function of a rubber duck?’?”

Harry snorted. “It’s a sex aid, chaps.” He could feel Hermione’s glare, but couldn’t help himself. “It’s used to enhance sexual pleasure for females. That’s why it’s usually ribbed.”

Dan and Emma discretely hid their smiles and giggles, while Hermione grimaced. She just knew that the pranksters wouldn’t be able to resist passing on that little bit of wisdom to their father.

“Really?” Fred asked. “‘Cause Dad’s got about a dozen of ‘em in the shed.”

“Yeah,” George added, “he’s out there playing with them all the time.”

Harry’s face scrunched together as he tried to avoid laughing. It really wouldn’t do well to tell them the truth now. “That’s... er... that’s interesting, fellas.” He couldn’t stop the next comment. “Just make sure he washes his hands when he’s finished with them, though.”

They nodded seriously, before sharing equally revolted looks. Percy raised his nose, sniffing at the twins. When they looked away, though, Harry saw Percy grin at him and wink, before marshalling his expression. Devious little bugger... I didn’t think he had a sense of humour. Making up his mind to hideously contort the timeline, Harry gathered up his power, and cast a long-term compulsion charm on the snobby Weasley.

Compulsion charms were curious things. They could be used to make someone tempted to do something, or act a certain way. They were used by medical professionals to make sure people didn’t do silly things, and were instrumental in helping people give up bad habits, like drinking and smoking.

Harry’s compulsion charm, however, was both more insidious, since it would control Percy’s life, and more benign, since it would change his life for the better. The compulsion slammed into Percy’s brain, immediately setting itself up in the frontal lobe, interfacing with his prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain that controls higher reasoning. It was a simple message, only six words: Family; it’s the most important thing.

Satisfied with his interference, he sat back, drinking his tea and eating Molly’s biscuits.

Returning home from the Weasleys’, with offers to return anytime he wanted, he headed into his bedroom. The goblins had delivered the metal shipment he’d ordered earlier in the summer holiday, along with the tools he’d need.

With a sigh, he got to work, slowly assembling the object.

Hermione opened the letter, reading through the booklist that had been sent. Gilderoy Lockhart! She squealed in her brain. She read through the titles, noting absently that it was his complete published works.

She made her way over to the bookshelf in her bedroom, taking down the library trunk Harry had given her for Christmas. She tapped her wand onto the jewel on the lid, specifying each book. She found the complete set in her trunk, even his autobiography, *Magical Me*. With a happy sigh, she opened the book, noticing the utterly gorgeous wizard on the front.

Harry had spent two days solid welding and soldering, before adding an immense space expansion charm on the object. The heavy work was finished. He showered, and collapsed into bed, sleeping for a straight twenty-four hours.

When he awoke, he shrunk the console he'd made earlier in the holiday, and dragged the heavy thing inside the new box. He told the soldering iron and started to carve a pattern into the floor. It took him nearly an hour, causing him to sweat a lot, but it was soon finished.

"I hate this part..." He muttered, as he pulled a small knife from his waistband, slashing across his wrist. Using his finger, he traced blood into the pattern, making sure the entire thing was covered with his blood. As soon as it was complete, Harry tapped the blood-filled pattern, causing it to light up with an unholy light.

He quickly manhandled the now-enlarged console into place, before adding the most powerful sticking charm he could. The combination of sticking charm and blood-rune anchored the console into place.

With a happy grin, Harry started to add the floor layering, since the console itself was almost twenty-feet high.

The grating covered the floor quickly, as Harry adjusted the space expansion charm, lowering it so the console was now at the correct height when one entered through the doors.

“Well... that’s the basics done. Now, just need to get the power systems up and working.” With a grunt, he got back to work.

Hermione was engrossed in her seventh Lockhart book, smiling dreamily as she thought of this amazing and powerful wizard.

Emma stuck her head round the doorway of her daughter’s bedroom. She noticed the smile on her daughter’s face. “Thinking about Harry, sweetie?”

“Hmm?” Hermione looked up, seeing her mother grin knowingly at her. “Sorry, didn’t hear you.”

“I could tell.” Emma replied. “Were you daydreaming about Harry?”

Hermione shook her head. “No, I was just reading about Gilderoy Lockhart. Whoever our Defence teacher this year is has assigned Lockhart’s books as textbooks.”

“And... that needs that dreamy smile?”

“He’s so amazing, Mum.” Hermione replied. “He’s done so many wonderful things. He’s powerful, and look!” She held the book out, showing the Wizing photo of Lockhart on the back. “Isn’t he handsome?”

A warning began to sound in Emma’s mind. This could not bode well... “Er, sweetie... do you think it wise to be fantasising over this Lockhart chap?”

“Oh, it’s harmless, Mum.” Hermione replied dismissively. “I doubt I’ll ever meet him. He is handsome, though, isn’t he?”

She glanced down at the book her daughter has passed to him, noting the smug, cheesy grin the man had. I don’t like him. She thought.

Harry's mirror chimed, drawing his attention. He stepped out of the box, heading into the living room, while wiping his hands on a rag. He tapped the rune on his mirror, accepting the call.

"Hi, Mrs. Granger. What's up?"

"Hello, Harry." Emma sounded uncharacteristically downbeat. "Er... you remember at Christmas, when you gave that trunk to Hermione, filled with books?"

"Yeah?"

"There's a set of books from a man called 'Lockhart'. What do you know about him?"

Harry looked at her, puzzled. "Er... well, he's written quite a bit about Defence Against the Dark Arts and more specifically about Dark Creatures. Don't rate him too highly myself, but according to his books, he's supposed to be quite good. Why?"

"Well..." Emma looked pensive for a moment. "Hermione seems to be quite... taken with him."

Ah, yes... that stupid bloody crush over the idiot. Harry remembered Hermione's actions in the original timeline, where she drew little hearts over Lockhart's lessons on her schedule. "Is she?"

"Yes. Quite taken with him, Harry."

He could read the underlying reason for Emma's call; she was worried about her daughter's relationship with Harry. "I wouldn't worry about it, Mrs. Granger. Hermione's a smart girl. I'm sure she'll make the right choice." He grinned. "Lockhart's actually doing a book signing tomorrow. Hermione could actually meet him, get her books signed by him, if she wanted to."

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Harry?" Emma asked.

Harry just nodded, waving his hand dismissively. Bloody marvellous... a relationship test at twelve years old. Just what I don't need. "I'm sure

it'll be fine, Mrs. Granger. Really... I'm not worried." And I'm getting better at lying, too. "It's at Flourish and Blotts. Starts at twelve-thirty. I could come and get you, if you want. I think the Weasleys are coming to the Alley tomorrow as well."

"O-Okay... if you're sure, Harry." She smiled warily at him, then vanished.

Hermione, I do hope you don't make a fool of yourself...

Harry collected the Grangers at 12pm, Apparating them to his flat one at a time. As soon as Hermione arrived, she started bouncing up and down, and inched towards the door.

"Hermione, dear, it doesn't start until half-twelve." Dan said softly, motioning for her to sit down on the couch.

"I know, Dad, it's just... it's Gilderoy Lockhart! He's so famous!"

And such a fraud. Harry thought. He had absolutely no plan of letting Lockhart suck him into another bloody photograph, just to boost his own popularity ratings.

"Coffee?" Harry offered, getting up to make the Grangers some refreshments.

At 12:25, Hermione had got up, grabbing the bag with her books in, and rushed to the door. Harry, bemused, followed her out of the door, across the Alley, and into Flourish and Blotts. Unlike last time, however, Harry loitered in the doorway, trying to keep out of the way of the pompous git.

As he waited, he saw the Weasleys come in, Ron glaring at him as he passed, while Ginny squeaked and darted away.

Christ, I really hate this. He thought viciously. How can she be so... so Ginny about her bloody crush? 'Perfect husband', my arse! She can't even talk to me. Which, when I think about it, is actually quite a good thing. He watched Hermione shuffled forward in the queue, her face a mask of concentration. If I wasn't totally in love with Hermione,

I'd find someone else to flirt with, while she's lusting after Flophart. Damn it...

Harry inched forwards, keeping an eye out for the photographer, as he made his way towards Dan and Emma. "Mr. Granger?"

Dan looked down at his daughter's boyfriend. "Yeah?"

"Er... it's a bit crowded in here, and I suspect there's a photographer around her somewhere. I'm gonna go back and wait at my flat. Why don't you pop back up when you're done in here?"

"Harry," Emma whispered, "is it really a good idea to just-"

"I'm sure it'll be fine." Harry said confidently, wishing he felt that way inside. He left the bookshop, rushing home, to get his Omnioculars. He'd be able to watch what happened closely.

Sitting on the balcony in the warm Autumn sunshine was actually rather pleasant. He had a large mug of tea, sitting in a Stay-Warm™ mug, Hedwig sitting on the railing, keeping an eye over her domain, with a small stack of owl treats she could help herself to.

Harry watched through the Omnioculars, seeing the elder Malfoy enter Flourish and Blotts. He jabbed the 'record button', zooming in. He saw Malfoy face off against the elder Weasley, until Weasley threw a punch. Ooh, that'll sting in the morning... He chuckled as Weasley and Malfoy went at it hammer and tongue, until Hagrid waded in, pulling the two men apart. Shame... that was quite enjoyable to watch. He saw the elder Malfoy slip the Horcrux-diary from his cloak, jabbing it into the ancient Transfiguration book Ginny would be using, before he thrust it into the girl's cauldron. And there it is. He quickly set up a replay on the Omnioculars, making sure he'd capture the moment for posterity.

Excellent... He chuckled evilly. I'll be coming for you soon, Malfoy. It'll be a pleasure ending you.

A half-hour later, the Grangers were back in the flat. Hermione was sitting on the couch, petting her books dreamily, checking them every

few moments, presumably making sure that the signatures hadn't disappeared.

"Have fun, Hermione?" Harry asked, his tone neutral.

Without looking up, Hermione nodded. "Yes... he's an amazing man... And he signed my books."

Harry nodded. "Right." He reached out, placing a hand on her shoulder, triggering the apparition. The two vanished in a trail of smoke. Harry was back ten seconds later, taking both adult Grangers back at once. As soon as they had landed, Harry vanished again, returning to his flat.

Dan looked at his daughter, wondering if she'd noticed that she'd been brought home. "Hermione?"

"Hmm?" Hermione still didn't look up.

"Shouldn't you put those away now?" He asked.

"When we get home, Dad." Hermione replied dreamily.

"We are home, Hermione."

"Hmm?" She looked up, noticing that she was in the living room at home. "How did we get back here?"

Emma looked crossly at her daughter, struggling to contain the bollocking that was trying to force its way out of her mouth. "Harry brought us home." She said tightly.

"Did he? When?"

Growling, Emma stalked out of the living room, heading for the kitchen so she could make herself a nice, soothing coffee (not as good as Harry's, of course, but needs must...) without shouting at her daughter's silliness.

"When did Harry bring us home?" Hermione asked her father.

Dan sat down on the other couch, staring intently at his daughter. "Let me ask you something, Hermione. Do you like Harry?"

She nodded quickly. "Of course I do, Dad. I thought you knew that."

He just nodded. "And do you like this Gilderoy Lockhart more than you like Harry?"

"No! Don't be silly, Dad. I don't even know Lockhart."

"Hmm." Dan nodded. "So, tell me something, daughter dearest... why didn't you notice when Harry left the bookshop? Why didn't you notice when we got back to Harry's flat? Why didn't you notice the rather hurt expression on Harry's face when he saw you caressing those books? Books, I might add, that Harry bought for you?"

"Eh?" Hermione looked confused. Truly, not a good look for her...

"Harry left the bookshop shortly after we arrived. Didn't want to get caught by a photographer. Why didn't you notice he'd left?"

"Er..." Hermione began to feel a little silly and a lot guilty. "I... I was just waiting for Lockhart to sign my books." She replied in a small voice.

"And when we got back to Harry's flat, you just sat there, staring at those damn books, sighing like a silly little girl with a crush."

"Er..."

"You didn't see his face, Hermione." Dan said sternly. "You'd rather spend time with a bunch of books written by a cheesy bloke than your boyfriend. How do you think he felt?"

"I see." Hermione said, dropping her books on the table, and racing up to her room, grabbing her communication mirror. "Harry Potter!"

Back on the balcony, Harry flicked idly through his copy of Gadding with Ghouls. He glanced up at Hedwig. "You know, babe, this really is

a marvellous work of fiction. The silly bugger didn't even bother to check his facts. He's got himself defeating a ghoul by hitting it with a Reducto. They're incorporeal! How's that gonna work?"

Behind him, Harry heard his communication mirror chiming for attention. Correctly guessing it was Hermione, Harry ignored it. Hedwig hooted sternly at him. "What? She'd rather spend her time having smutty dreams about a glorified faker than spend time with me." He defended himself to the bird. "I think I'm entitled to make her sweat a little bit."

She hooted again. "No, I'm not being silly." Harry replied. "Remember how you acted when I brought the demon cat back?" Hedwig cocked her head, before hooting again, much quieter this time. "It's the same thing. You thought I was replacing you. Snubbing you."

The mirror chimed for attention again, still ignored by the 'Boy-Who-Lived'. Hedwig hooted mournfully. "No, I'm not gonna dump her. I love her, even though she can be a little silly at times. It's just... she's still twelve. I may look twelve, but I'm 113 inside. I can see Lockhart for what he is, even if others can't."

Hedwig hooted again, sternly. "No, Hedwig, I'm not gonna make her suffer." He thought for a moment, then corrected his statement. "Not for too long, anyway."

He took a swig from his tea, ignoring the chiming of his mirror, which was growing more frequent.

Hermione raced downstairs, rushing into the living room. "Dad, he's not answering his mirror!"

"Can you blame him?" Emma asked archly. "Honestly, Hermione, I'm disappointed in you. Harry's a great boy, and you just snubbed him."

Hermione slumped onto the couch, tears in her eyes. "You know... he asked me to be his girlfriend at the end of last term." She said morosely.

“We know.” Dan and Emma said together. Dan carried on. “And less than two months later, you’re lusting after a wizard old enough to be your dad. What’s wrong, Harry not famous enough for you?”

“What?” Hermione’s head shot up. “No!”

“Not handsome enough for you?” Emma asked.

“He’s very handsome.” Hermione replied quietly, blushing.

“So... you have a famous, handsome wizard, who asks you to be his girlfriend, then you start lusting after another famous, handsome wizard.” Dan shook his head. “You know, it’s things like that that could get you a reputation.”

“What do I do?” Hermione asked mournfully. “I mean...” She trailed off, not sure what to say.

“Wait until Harry answers his mirror, explain it to him, and go from there.” Dan said. “There’s not a lot else you can do.”

What have I done? The question reverberated through Hermione’s head.

After having a nap on the balcony, Harry woke up and stretched, knocking Hedwig from her perch on Harry’s stomach. “Why do you have to sleep on me?” Harry yawned. “You have big sharp talons, you know. They’re not comfortable.”

Hedwig gave a hoot which roughly translated to ‘piss off, you’re comfortable’, which made Harry chuckle as he stood up. He headed back into the living room, throwing Lockhart’s book onto the couch, before heading towards the mirror. Better get this over with. He made sure his expressionless mask was in place. “Hermione Granger!”

The mirror was instantly answered, Hermione’s anxious face appearing right in front of him. “Harry?”

“Hermione.”

“Are you okay?”

“Define ‘okay’, and I’ll answer.”

“Er... I’m sorry, Harry.”

“Are you? For what?”

“For ignoring you when we got to your place. For fawning over Lockhart. For not noticing you leave the bookshop. Ignoring you when we got back to your flat. I’m sorry.”

Harry nodded, his mask still firmly in place. “I see.”

“I... I was excited, by the thought of meeting Lockhart.”

“I see.”

“Harry... how can I make it up to you?”

Ooh! Blackmail opportunities! No... behave yourself, Potter. This is serious. “Are you prepared to do whatever I want to make this up to me?”

She nodded, clearly not considering just how easily that statement could be abused. “Whatever I need to do, Harry. You’re important to me.”

“Okay, here it is; don’t do it again.”

“What?”

Harry just shook his head. “Hermione, please understand. You’re very important to me... hell, you’re probably the most important person in my life. I don’t want to lose you, but to be perfectly frank, I won’t be fucked about. If you don’t want to be with me, just say so. I haven’t lied to you, Hermione, or tried to lead you on with stupid games. I don’t like it, and I won’t stand for it.”

“I understand.” She replied meekly.

“All those people who play little games with their significant others, testing to make sure they’re loved or loyal. Flirting with other people so their partner will come over to stop them. I won’t play those games, Hermione. If you start lusting after someone else, I’ll assume you don’t want to be with me, and end it. If I do end it, then we’re done. Are we clear?”

She nodded quickly, looking remarkably similar to Dobby. That reminds me... little bugger hasn’t turned up yet with his warning. He pushed it to the back of his mind. “I understand, Harry. I promise, not again.”

“Not even when you see Lockhart again?”

“How do you know that? He announced it in the bookshop.”

“I have eyes and ears everywhere.” Harry replied. “He’s our new Defence professor, isn’t he?”

“Yeah. He’s looking forward to meeting you. He was hoping you’d be at the bookshop. Wanted to get a photo with you.”

“I guessed, which is one of the reasons I left.” He decided to twist the knife a little. “Also, seeing my girlfriend drooling over the fop didn’t help, either.”

“Again, Harry, I’m sorry. I... I didn’t think how it would make you feel.” Harry’s mask cracked a little, showing Hermione a world of pain. She gasped when she saw it, and her guilt doubled. The mask was repaired, but the damage had been done. “How can I fix this, Harry?” She whispered. “How can I make this better?”

Harry smiled weakly. “Don’t do it again, Hermione. Please.” He sighed, running his hands through his hair. “We’ll be okay, Hermione. I promise.”

“Y-You promise?” She stammered.

“Yes.” He replied firmly. “Just...” He trailed off.

"I promise, Harry. I don't want to lose you."

I seriously doubt you could. Harry thought. "Anyway... going back to Hogwarts, soon. Need to start packing."

"Do... do you want me to come over? Apologise in person?"

Harry, perpetually dense when it came to the female of the species, could easily see what she was actually asking. "That's not necessary, Hermione. Seriously. Tell you what, I'll meet you at King's Cross at 9:30 on Tuesday morning. We can discuss it in person then."

"O-Okay, Harry. If you're sure."

"I am, Hermione. Don't worry about it, seriously. We'll be okay."

"Okay, Harry. Good night."

Harry jabbed the mirror, idly wondering why he'd just turned down a guaranteed sexual encounter with his once and possibly-future wife. I'm too bloody noble for my own good. That, and I doubt it'd work well enough to make it truly enjoyable.

A loud crack from behind him made Harry spin round, his wand flying into his hand. Stood before him was a tiny creature, dressed in a dirty pillow case.

"Dobby." Harry greeted the tiny creature politely. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Harry Potter knows of Dobby?" The elf's squeaky voice replied. "Dobby has heard of your greatness, sir, but to greet an elf by name... I is honoured, sir. Truly honoured."

"Dobby, before we talk further, may I ask you a question?" The elf's head nodded vigorously, his ears flapping against his face. "While an elf is in another wizard's residence, does he have to follow the rules of that wizard's house, provided they don't contradict any orders from his master?"

Dobby had to work his way through the sentence for a few moments, before he nodded again. "Oh yes, Harry Potter. Dobby will obeys any orders you gives, but can't go against family orders, sir."

"Good. Dobby, you will not harm yourself while in this house. I don't care what you say; you will not punish yourself."

The tiny creature looked uncertain, but nodded slowly.

"Now, I believe you're here to warn me about a terrible plot that Lucius Malfoy is attempting to plan at Hogwarts this year. You've also come to tell me that I can't return to Hogwarts, since this plan may kill me. You're also prepared to restrain me in my home, so that I cannot go to Hogwarts. Am I correct?"

Dobby nodded, his jaw hanging open.

"I understand your mission, Dobby. But, I have to go to Hogwarts. I'm the only one who can protect the students there, and end this plot from happening."

"But, sir, you-"

"I have no choice!" Harry barked. "If I don't go back, hundreds of people will be killed. I can't stay away, Dobby, I simply can't!"

"There is danger, Harry Potter! Terrible danger! Dobby must protect Harry Potter!"

"No!" Harry bellowed at the little elf. "I'm sorry, Dobby, but I cannot stay away. I will not stay away. If you try to stop me, you will become an enemy. I don't want that, but I can't let you interfere with my mission."

"Dobby understands, sir. Dobby is used to death threats. Dobby gets them ten times a day at home. But Dobby must stop Harry Potter from returning to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, sir. Dobby must!"

“You do what you’ve got to do, Dobby. Just as I will.” Harry said, turning his back on the diminutive little creature.

“Very well, sir.” Dobby said, before clicking his fingers and vanished with a crack.

Shaking his head, Harry made his way into his bedroom, and entered his new travel arrangement. Hmm... I guess it’s a good job I got this finished in time. He tapped the keyboard on the laptop, before opening his journal file. He’d written down a lot of the ‘history of things to come’, as he’d called it, but knew he’d been making changes.

He started a new file. Let’s see... how about I call this one, ‘Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets’?

(1) Yes, I know this story is currently in 1992, and Goldeneye wasn’t released until 1995, but I don’t care. It’s a great film.

I’m using, as my example for Crookshanks, the cat from Prisoner of Azkaban, and I’m sorry if you disagree, but it is a powerful-ugly creature.

– CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR –

Getting to School and Sorting Yourself Out

Tuesday, September 1st, 1992, dawned with bright sunshine. Of course, since Harry lived in the centre of London, one of the most polluted cities in the world, the sun shone through a haze of smog.

After yawning, scratching and farting, Harry made his way to the bathroom, peeing noisily and brushing his teeth, desperate to remove the taste and smell of mouldy carpet from his mouth. A quick workout, followed by a long, hot shower, soon cleared his mind, and three litres of coffee provided him with enough energy to amble around his flat.

He put Hedwig in her cage, ignoring her squawk of protest, because he had a vague feeling of needing her. Of course, he expected Dobby to seal the barrier again, so Hedwig would be necessary. He explained this to his familiar, but she was sulking, so he passed her a treat, hoping to mollify her enough.

He grabbed his trunk, shrinking it down and slipping it into his pocket. Huh... there's a thought. How am I supposed to walk the streets with an owl cage? Nyah, this is London. I doubt people would notice if I walked down the street naked. He shrugged, deciding against taking the Floo, simply because he had no desire to go flying out the other end, especially since he was carrying Hedwig.

Making sure everything was switched off, he activated the safety systems in his flat (a fire-fighting charm, as well as a stasis charm, making sure his Venomous Tentacular wouldn't eat everything in the building while he was gone) and left, whistling gaily.

His arrival at King's Cross ten minutes later went without remark. People just bustled past him, ignorant of the fact he was holding a diurnal bird-of-prey. Londoners... He scoffed as he entered the café, quickly ordering himself a coffee and a muffin.

While he was waiting, he flicked through the Financial Times, happily noting that the stock value of his recent investments into mobile

phone companies had gone up significantly. That'll cheer the goblins up.

A shriek of pleasure announced the arrival of Hermione, as she rushed over, and wrapped him in a hug. Her parents had dropped her off outside the station, knowing that she needed to speak to Harry in private.

She went to the counter and ordered herself a Diet Coke and a bag of crisps, before sitting opposite Harry, looking distinctly nervous.

"So..."

"Hermione." Harry said firmly. "It's fine. Stop it. I know Lockhart attracts young witches. Don't like it, but I know it happens. I just... I'd have thought you'd have been immune to his charms."

"I will be, Harry." Hermione replied. "It's just... I mean, he's famous."

"So am I, Hermione." Harry replied quietly.

"No." She contradicted. "You're just Harry."

Yes! "Okay." He said simply. "But, please... if you'd rather chase after him, let me know, so I don't waste my time with you."

She reached over and took his hand. "You're not wasting time with me, Harry. I... I like you. I like being your girlfriend. I wouldn't risk that by lusting after him."

"Then we're good, My Only." He smiled at her and squeezed her hand, reaching up with his free hand to drink his coffee.

The two sat in the café until 10:55. Harry noticed the time, and stood up quickly. He grabbed Hermione's trunk, and loaded it onto a trolley. Hermione grabbed Crookshanks' carrier, and the two walked towards Platform 9¾ at a brisk clip. In front of them, the Weasley family passed through the portal, leaving Ron out, who was fussing with his trolley.

"We need to hurry, Harry." Hermione said. "It's almost time for the train to set off."

Harry increased his pace, Hermione keeping pace next to him. In front of them, Ron was still manhandling his trolley. Harry broke into a trot, remembering that it was best to go through the portal at a brief run. However, his plan was thwarted when the trolley impacted the wall savagely, throwing him to the floor, and letting Hermione's trunk and Hedwig's owl cage collapse on top of him. Hermione managed to pull herself to a stop before impact. Behind them, Ron was scowling at the two.

"Are you gonna sit out here all bloody day?" He snapped.

Harry looked up, ignoring the hostility in the tone. "The portal's shut." He said, placing his hand on the wall. Normally, his hand would have passed through, but now it rested on the cold brick. "Why has the portal shut?"

The trio looked up at the clock hanging from the ceiling. "Oh, no!" Hermione cried. "It's 11 o'clock! The train will have gone, now."

Ron looked at them for a moment, before his face lit up. "I know! My dad's car flies!" He looked at Hermione. "We could use that to fly to Hogwarts!"

Hermione glanced at Harry, matching his expression of incredulity. "Are you serious?" She snapped. "You expect us to take an illegal flying car to school?"

"Yeah!" Ron said in a jaunty tone, nodding vigorously.

"No!" Harry replied, using the exact same tone of voice. "I refuse. I'll send Hedwig on."

Ron scowled at Harry, before turning to Hermione, who shook her head. He grabbed his trolley and dashed out of the door.

"Shouldn't we stop him?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. "I seriously doubt we could, at least, not without hexing him. And we can't do that in public." He heard the sound of the battered Ford Anglia start up, Ron grinding on the gears, before the car backfired. Harry peered out of the door, and saw the Anglia, in full view of the people around the train station, start to rise into the air.

"The obliviators'll have a hell of a time explaining that one." He muttered, before heading out of the exit.

"What do we do now, Harry?" Hermione asked, following him out of the door. "And why couldn't we get through the portal?"

"Well, the first part's simple. We head back to my place, and I'll send Hedwig on to Professor Dumbledore explaining that we couldn't get through. Then, we might as well take a Portkey directly to school." As to your other question, I don't think I can really explain that Dobby's being a little arse and trying to keep me away.

Once the two were outside, they ducked into an alley to shrink Hermione's trunk, and headed into the sunshine, Hermione shyly taking Harry's hand, and leading them back to Charing Cross Road.

"And where do we get a Portkey from?" Hermione asked, squeezing his hand gently.

"Normally, you'd need to contact the Ministry of Magic, who'd charge you for it."

"Normally?"

"Well..." Harry blushed lightly. "As the head of an Ancient and Noble family, I automatically have Portkey creation rights, so I can make them. I've been playing around with them over the summer. I thought I could use them instead of the Floo."

Hermione sniggered. She'd seen Harry's attempts to Floo. No matter how he entered the fireplace, he'd come flying out of the other end. "I understand that, Harry. I've seen you Floo."

Harry mock-glared at her, before relenting, and letting out a small laugh. "The main problem I've found with Portkey travel is... well, it leaves me feeling... naked."

"Naked?" Hermione squeaked.

"Not literally." Harry was quick to reassure her. "I don't mean that you end up unclothed at the end of the journey. It's just..." He thought for a moment. How best to describe the sensation? "Imagine being in the eye of a cyclone, spinning around wildly. That, combined with the sensation of somebody dragging you around by a hook in the navel, and that's a Portkey."

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Sounds unpleasant."

Harry nodded. "It is. So, I started thinking to myself. What if you were inside a Portkey?"

"How would that work?" Hermione asked, entering the Leaky Cauldron, Harry close on her heels.

"Well, I was thinking. If you were to make a Portkey out of a box or something, you'd be inside, and the Portkey itself would contain the momentum, leaving you without the horrid sensation."

"That sounds like it makes sense." Hermione allowed. "You'd be a bit uncomfortable, though, being inside a box."

Harry scoffed as he opened the portal onto Diagon Alley. "Hermione, do you forget you're a witch? All you'd need is a space expansion charm, and you'd have plenty of room."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "Sometimes, Harry, in my excitement, I do forget some of the important parts of our world." She gave a mock-sniff. "That's no reason to mock me."

Harry could read Hermione like a book, and gave her a hug, even though he knew she wasn't upset. "You know I'm not mocking you, Hermione. My Only." He added the last part tenderly.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Are you going to insist on using that nickname?" She asked.

"I think it fits you rather well." Harry defended himself. "You are My Only, Hermione." He gave her his 'heart-stoppingly gorgeous' smile, making her knees go weak for a moment.

"Fine." She pouted. "I still need a nickname for you, though, Harry."

The two approached the vacant shop, no. 93 Diagon Alley. Harry glanced around, making sure no-one was looking as he opened the door. They entered the flat, Harry locking the door behind them.

"I'm sure you'll think of something, My Only."

She looked around. "So, where's this box?" She asked. "Don't tell me you don't have one." Harry took her hand, and led her to his bedroom. "Harry, if my parents were to walk in..."

He rolled his eyes. "Please, I'm twelve. Not quite ready to do that." He cocked his eyebrow. "Yet." He added impishly. Hermione looked at him, probing him with an intense stare. He shifted, slightly uncomfortable with Hermione blatantly checking him out. "Plumbing's not quite ready for that."

She relented, smiling warmly at him. "Not a problem. I'm not ready to do that, either." Although when I am... I hope it's with you.

Harry opened one of the cupboards in his room, where a tall shiny silver box rested. It was about seven feet tall, three feet wide and three feet deep. On the top was a white light.

"Not a lot of room in there." Hermione commented. Harry arched a brow at her, making her nod in realisation. "Right, space expansion charm. Got it."

He opened the door, letting her in. She got her first glimpse, and let out a tiny gasp. Inside the box was a large, well-lit room. In the centre of the room was a round console, with some kind of technological device sitting on top. For a moment, she thought the blue spikes

inside looked like interlocking-fingers, before she made her way over, and looked at the console.

There were a number of pieces of technology on the console. The only thing she truly recognised was a laptop computer, which appeared to be melded to the console. "Harry? What is all this?"

Harry went over to the console, and tapped a few buttons. "It's mainly Muggle electronics, charmed to work off magic. Have you heard of the GPS system?"

She nodded. Her dad had been desperate to buy one of the devices when it had been released a couple of years ago. "From what I understand, satellites in orbit determine where you are, and give you your exact position, to a couple of feet."

"Spot on." Harry said, smiling at her warmly. "There's a GPS positioning scanner inside the console. As such, we'll always know where the box lands."

"What else?"

Harry looked at the packed console. "Well, the laptop's for interfacing with the GPS scanner, has a database I've been putting together. It's also useful as a CD player, and can play games on it." He looked at her, a little sheepish when he admitted that. "That panel," he pointed to a large panel, with a shiny reflective surface, a few buttons and an odd funnel, "is for communications. The mirror is the same as I gave you for last Christmas, the buttons are actually Runes. That weird little nozzle is a connection to the Floo system. You can't travel through it, but you can use it to communicate."

Hermione ambled over, looking at a small numerical keypad. "What about this?"

Harry glanced down. "Ah, that hooks into the portable telecommunications network."

"Huh?"

“It’s a link into the mobile telephone grid. You can use that to contact any telephone line in the world.” He grinned at the last part. “It’s free, too.”

Hermione glanced at him. “And is that legal?” She asked archly.

“Well...” Harry glanced at her. “It’s not illegal... as such...”

“What about this bit?” Hermione had abandoned her bollocking for the next panel.

“Ah, the internal dimensions.” Harry said, eager to leave the telling off. “Basically, it’s another set of Runes for manipulating the space enchantment charms. You can use that to expand the inside, or shrink it down.”

Hermione nodded. “This is really cool, Harry. How did you make it?”

Harry picked a book up off the floor, and handed it to her. It was a Runes textbook, an old one by the look of it. “It’s all in there. It took me a while to inscribe the Runes. And, I had to use blood-runes, so that only I would be able to use it.”

Hermione stared at him. “And how does this console work with the box? If you make this into a Portkey, wouldn’t just the console go?”

“Again, Runes.” Harry said. “The centre of this console is sitting on a... well, I call it a Runic Keystone, which is etched into the floor of the box. That, and a Permanent Sticking Charm.”

Hermione’s brain began working through the details. “So... the console itself becomes the Portkey, which takes the rest of the box, and whatever’s inside it, to wherever it needs to go.”

Harry nodded. “In a word, yes. The best part is, there’s a small reactor inside the console, so it doesn’t take loads of magic to make it work.”

“Do you have blueprints? And the Arithmancy formula you used on it?” She batted her eyelashes at him. “I wouldn’t mind taking a look at it.”

“I’ll show you some other time.” He grumbled. Making his way around the console, he jabbed a few buttons on the computer, then began typing. “Okay, where should we end up?”

Hermione had opened the old textbook, and was starting to make her way through. “Hmm? Sorry, Harry, what was that?”

“When we set off, where should we end up? Hogsmeade train station? Outside the main gates? The main doors? The Great Hall? Where should we materialise?”

Looking impish, Hermione grinned at him. “I take it you want to make an entrance?”

“Hermione!” Harry looked innocently at her. “I’m shocked, shocked and disappointed you’d think that of me! You know how much I hate my fame! Why would I do more to call attention to myself?” She stared at him, hard, for a few moments. “All right, fine, yes, I do want to make an entrance.” He pondered for a moment. “Well, a better entrance than shit-for-brains Weasley’ll make, anyway.”

“So, Great Hall. During the Sorting would have the most impact.”

Harry tapped a few more buttons, setting the co-ordinates on the console. “Okay... co-ordinates are set. All we’ll need to do is activate it, and then we’ll set off. It’ll take about ten minutes to go from here to Northern Scotland, and the Sorting usually begins at about seven, so we’ll set off at 6:50, yeah?”

She nodded at him.

“Now, I’d better send Hedwig off. It’s good manners to tell Dumbledore that we’ll be a little late.” He quickly scribbled a note. “Oh, and let Crooks out of his basket, will ya? He’ll be in an evil mood if he’s in there for too long.”

Hermione complied, letting her cat out of the basket. Harry cleared his throat. "Now, listen here, furball. You destroy any of my curtains, and you'll end up singing soprano, is that clear?"

Crookshanks just gave him a nasty look, and leapt up to the back of the couch, before he promptly fell asleep. Harry, shaking his head, made his way over to Hedwig's cage. "Hey there, beautiful. Can you take this letter to Dumbledore for me? Just let him know that we'll be a bit late. When you've dropped it off, head up to the Owlery for a sleep, okay?"

Hedwig nodded, before flying out of the apartment.

"So... we appear to have several hours to kill, Miss Granger." He said, leading her into the living room. "What shall we occupy ourselves with now?"

The two had occupied themselves with watching Bond movies, eating enough junk food to cause cavities and sneaking little kisses while changing tapes. Hermione had tried to play Time Crisis on his Playstation, but was utterly crap. She just didn't have the killer instinct necessary to blow the bad guys away.

Hmm... I'll need to change that for the future... At six-thirty, Harry had Hermione try to get the evil cat back in his travel carrier. At quarter-to-seven, they finally succeeded, Crookshanks hissing and spitting a storm at Harry.

"Hey, don't pick of me, evil git!" Harry spat at the cat. "It's not my bloody fault." He glanced up at Hermione. "Why did I pick him for you in the first place?"

"He's gorgeous, Harry." Hermione said primly. "He's a very nice cat."

"He's a twisted, evil little bastard." Harry mumbled under his breath. "Honestly, he wasn't nearly this nasty to me the first time around." Actually... that's something to think about.

He and Hermione bustled themselves into the Portkey box, Hermione gently placing Crooks' carrier on the floor, while Harry carelessly dropped Hedwig's empty cage.

"Are you ready for this?" He asked.

Hermione suddenly looked up. "I thought this was supposed to be a smooth ride?"

"Oh, it should be." Harry replied, before grinning at her. "Did I forget to mention I haven't actually tested it yet?"

"What? Is it safe?"

Harry didn't answer. He just jabbed a button the console. Underneath the floor, a loud, ominous clang was heard, as the blue fingers at the centre of the console began to move up and down.

"What's happening?" Hermione called over the noise.

"The gyroscope's starting up." Harry replied. "It should quieten down..." The noise faded to a background level. "Right about now. The gyroscope needs to get up to speed. Basically, you spin at something like 600rpm using a Portkey, so the computer works out how fast the gyroscope needs to spin in the opposite direction, cancelling out the nauseating sensation."

The floor began to vibrate slightly, before evening out. "Takes about 10 seconds for everything gets up to speed, and now we're moving through a magical vortex." The blue fingers in the console moved up and down regularly, a faint wheezing/groaning sound coming from them.

"So, we should be there in about ten minutes." Harry said, stepping back from the console and sitting on one of the chairs, bolted to the railing surrounding the console. Hermione let go of the console, and sat on the chair next to her boyfriend.

"Harry?"

"Yes, gorgeous?" He replied, noting that she yet again blushed at the compliment.

"I swear I'll be good around Lockhart this year."

"Hermione, please, leave it. We've had the discussion, it's sorted, over, forgotten. Let's worry about the fop if he does anything annoying in future. For now, it's me and you, My Only. Me and you."

She leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder. "Me and you, Harry." She replied. "I just wanted you to know, though."

"I know, sweetie."

In the Great Hall, moods were strained. Ron Weasley's... unorthodox arrival had sent Snape into a massive rant on foolish Gryffindors. It didn't help that McGonagall agreed with him, assigning Weasley a month of detention with Mr. Filch.

Of course, when Ron had told McGonagall and Snape that Harry and Hermione couldn't get through the barrier, but had refused to join him, they became a little worried. That worry faded when Harry's owl arrived, bearing a note saying the two would be arriving by Portkey at around 7pm.

Dumbledore had read the note, one bushy eyebrow raising up, as he wondered how young Harry would get hold of a Portkey, or how he expected to Portkey through the heavy wards surrounding the school. He wasn't too worried, though. When Harry couldn't get through, he'd be able to go and get him, thereby earning himself more points with the 'Boy-Who-Lived', and getting himself one step closer to being able to guide the boy in the direction he needed to go.

McGonagall led the first years into the hall, and took up her customary place at the side of the stool with the Sorting Hat on.

She was about to call out the first name, when a wheezing/groaning sound filled the air. All the teachers, and several of the older students, drew their wands. Quickly looking around, McGonagall saw a flashing light in the corner of the hall, just next to the stage and staff table. As

the sound got louder, a tall silver box began to appear, filling slowly as the sound reached a crescendo, then became silent. After a moment, the door opened, revealing Harry Potter, carrying a trunk, and Hermione Granger, holding a pet carrier with a spitting animal inside.

Harry waited until Hermione was out, then shut the door, and waved his wand. The box made a strange 'blip' noise, the light on top flashing once, before the wheezing groaning sound started up, the box gradually began to dematerialise.

Harry took Hermione's free hand, and led her to the Ravenclaw table, ignoring the odd glances he was receiving from the rest of the students.

"Thank you, Harry." Hermione said as she sat down. Harry looked up at the staff table, smiling at Dumbledore's gob-smacked expression.

"Good evening, sir. Sorry we're late. Had a bit of problems getting onto platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$."

"O-Of course, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore replied. "Still, you're here, now." He turned to his deputy. "Please, carry on with the Sorting, Minerva."

Harry watched the Sorting with ambivalence. Most of the people there waiting to be Sorted were in the right houses. There was only one that Harry wanted to influence.

When the name was called, "Lovegood, Luna", Harry sat up marginally straighter in his chair. When the hat fell on her head, Harry swore he could hear the Sorting Hat start to giggle.

This one is different. The Hat sent via Legilimens to Harry's mind.

She is, isn't she? A thought occurred to Harry. Adrian, can you do IQ tests?

Yes, I can. In fact, I do. I measure everyone's intelligence when they place me on their head. After a moment, the Hat started up again. In case you were wondering, your IQ is 196.

And Hermione's?

202. Only three people smarter than her in the history of my Sorting.

Out of idle curiosity, who were they?

Rowena Ravenclaw, Wendelin the Weird, in 1487, and Lily Evans in 1971.

Huh. Curious...

You're wondering about Miss Lovegood, I assume? She's 199.

She's Ravenclaw material, definitely.

Well... that was my first instinct as well. I assume, since your knowledge of the future includes her, that you know she's... different, from most people.

Very much so. She was one of my best friends. I hope she'll be that again.

Very well, Milord. "Ravenclaw!" The Hat shouted.

Luna stood up calmly, taking the hat off, and placing it back on the small stool. She calmly skipped down the aisle, causing several people to laugh, before she stopped directly in front of Harry. He looked at her, curious as to why she'd stopped there.

"I've been told to tell you something." Luna said in that sing-song way.

Harry's brow arched. "Oh?"

"Yes." Luna replied. All of a sudden, her dreamy air vanished, as her eyes turned jet-black. This was a new one to Harry. When she'd channelled visions before, her eyes turned pure white. Never black.

Her voice became harsher. "The stream has been diverted by your actions. The lessons you learnt have become unravelled."

She grabbed his face with both hands, her fingertips resting against his temples, as she leaned forward. "Embrace eternity, warrior, and learn!" She kissed him. Out of her eyes and mouth, streams of yellow energy pulsed into Harry, who after a moment started to scream into her mouth. He dropped to his knees, Luna dropping right with him, as the energy transferred.

Hermione leapt to her feet, drawing her wand from her sleeve. She couldn't think of what spell to use, as anything she shot at Luna could hit Harry. "Stop!" She shouted.

At the Head Table, Dumbledore leapt to his feet, making his way around the table, closely followed by McGonagall, Flitwick and Snape. They stood behind Luna, very aware of the energy fluctuations she was causing. In the background, all four hundred-plus students in the hall could hear a four-note drumbeat, repeating over and over.

The instant it stopped, Harry slumped backwards, closely followed by Luna. Hermione dropped to her knees, pulling Harry's head into her lap. "Harry? Are you okay?"

Luna slowly, almost painfully, pulled herself to her knees, panting heavily. Hermione shot daggers at her. "What did you do to him?" She spat.

Luna's determined air was replaced by her conventional serene madness. "I don't know." She said, her voice back to its dreamy normality. "I didn't understand the words."

"What words?" Hermione asked quickly.

Luna fixed her with a gaze. "I was told to 'e-mail an upgrade' to him. I don't know what that means."

"It means you were passing information to me." Harry's dry, scratchy voice suddenly spoke up. He opened his eyes, hissing in pain before he closed them again. "Oh... migraine, migraine..."

As if on cue, Madam Pomfrey entered the hall, rushing straight to Harry with her bag. "What's wrong?" She snapped.

"Headache potion, please." Harry requested, keeping his eyes closed. A vial was pressed into his hand, which he quickly swallowed, gagging for a moment on the revolting taste, before his headache began to fade. He sat up, quickly wriggling, to make sure everything was working. He fixed Luna with a sharp gaze. "Luna?" He asked calmly.

"Yes, Harry?" Luna sing-songed.

"If you ever feel a need to do that again, bloody warn me!" Harry slowly pulled himself to his feet, before slumping onto the bench. Hermione quickly sat next to him, squeezing his hand. He pulled it loose, and wrapped it around her shoulder, pulling her close. "I'm all right."

Luna sat on the bench next to him. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"I know, Luna." He replied. "A bit of warning would have been nice, though."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. Harry looked up. "Oh, sorry, sir."

"What is happening, Mr. Potter?" He asked.

"Damned if I know, Headmaster." Harry replied casually. "From what I can tell, Luna passed... something, some kind of knowledge into my brain. Could just be a recipe for a perfect chicken soup, as far as I can tell."

Luna shook her head. "It's not. I don't like Chicken soup."

Harry closed his eyes. "Treacle sponge pudding?" He said after a moment. "It's very fattening, you know, Luna. Especially if made with proper custard."

She just smiled, looking at Dumbledore curiously.

"I believe we should continue this conversation later." Dumbledore replied firmly.

"Wouldn't be any point, Headmaster." Harry said, equally as firmly. "Whatever... this, is, it's protected. I can feel it integrating with my mind, and there's a hell of a lot of protection mixed in with it."

Dumbledore just walked away, shaking his head in disappointment.

"Harry?" Hermione whispered from next to him.

"Later, Hermione." Harry said, gesturing to the student population, who suddenly seemed to find Harry so very interesting. "Too many people around here."

After the puddings had vanished from the table, drawing a tiny moan of protest from a certain blonde first year, Dumbledore stood up.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to a new year here at Hogwarts! Now that we're all fed and watered, I have a few start of term announcements for you. All students, especially the Gryffindor fourth years, should note that the Forbidden Forest is out of bounds. That's why we call it the 'Forbidden' Forest, instead of the 'You-shouldn't-really-go-there' Forest. Our caretaker, Mr. Filch, has asked me to remind you that magic is not to be used in the corridors. The list of banned items has now reached two hundred and twenty-one items. The entire list can be seen in Mr. Filch's office if you so desire.

"This year, we have a new teacher. Please welcome our new Defence against the Dark Arts Professor, Gilderoy Lockhart!"

The irritating man stood up, waving around and smiling that inane grin at anything female.

Harry felt, rather than saw, the mood in the room change. A cloud of pheromones rose up, choking the hall. Deciding to be irritating, Harry rested his head on his fists, and stared at the man, sighing dreamily.

Padma looked up. "Harry?"

He looked at her, and sighed. "He's so pretty." He said, getting a few odd looks from the people sitting near him.

Hermione leaned in to whisper in his ear. "You look like a bloody idiot, Harry." He stared at her, arching an eyebrow. She nodded, grimacing slightly. "Yes, I know... I was one when I met him in the bookshop. I'm better now, promise."

Padma realised she was being a bit obvious with her crush, so just helped herself to a glass of water. She glanced around, noting that even some of the teachers were staring at the new professor. She leaned towards Harry. "Do we all look that bloody stupid?"

Harry nodded, grinning at her.

"Hmm." She decided, there and then, to ruthlessly stamp the crush out of her system.

When the feast had ended, Harry and Hermione vanished to the first empty classroom they could find. As expected, Hermione was positively bristling with questions.

Harry cut her off before she could begin. "Hermione, let me tell you what I know. But, this information has to be kept secret. Not just for me, but for everyone."

She nodded, a bit put out that he'd interrupted her rant.

"Luna is a Seer. Not a fraud like Trelawney, but a genuine Seer. She has visions of the future. When she kissed me... and I know you didn't like that. I didn't either, she passed some of that knowledge on. I don't know why."

Hermione thought for a moment. "So... she gave you a vision of the future?"

Harry pondered for a moment. "I think so. Divination's such a woolly bloody discipline... The future's not set, though. There's no fate but what we make for ourselves."

“‘A man looks one way and coughs, the world lives. He looks another way and coughs, the world dies.’ Chaos Theory.”

“Something like that.” Harry said. “But... temporal mechanics scares the crap out of me. I mean... I’ve got an image in my head. We live. We die. I don’t know the difference. I do see an explosion, though.”

Hermione bit down on her lip, causing Harry’s usual distraction whenever she did that. “So... what are you gonna do about it?”

“Not a lot I can do.” Harry replied, running his fingers through his hair, causing her distraction, as usual. “I suppose just carry on as normal.”

“What about Luna?” Hermione asked in a small voice.

Harry pulled her into a tight hug. “You’re still My Only.” He said into her hair. “You’ll always be My Only.” He breathed deeply, smelling the faint vanilla in her hair. “But, I think we should stick close to Luna.”

She nodded, breathing in his musky scent as well.

When Harry dropped into bed, he started to pick through the ‘e-mailed upgrade’ Luna had given him. It contained a series of scenes, a montage of sorts, of the next couple of years.

Dumbledore stood in the Great Hall, wearing dour black robes. Black banners hung from the roof, and a sombre mood permeated the air.

“We are gathered here to pay our final respects to one of our students. Harry Potter.”

Whoa! Harry thought. I’m dead? How the hell did that happen? He closed his eyes, immersing himself back into the memory.

“It is the first time in the history of Hogwarts that a student has lost their life during a Quidditch match. Evidence shows that the Bludger which hit Harry’s head was tampered with. Officers from the

Department of Magical Law Enforcement will be here tomorrow. I would like every student to give them their full co-operation."

Harry sat up, fuming. "Dobby!" He screeched. "Dobby kills me? Little bastard... after everything I did for him!" He let his aura flare for a moment, before he pulled himself under control. There was more to see.

"Students, this is the second time this year we have gathered to pay our respects. Ginevra Weasley and Penelope Clearwater will be missed. As we have been unable to contain the Chamber of Secrets, Hogwarts will not re-open for the next school year. We have arranged with the Board of Governors for an alternative site in the Ministry Building be made available."

Harry breathed a heavy sigh. Without him around to stop the attacks, Blink the basilisk had apparently run rampant through Hogwarts, killing Ginny Weasley in the Chamber of Secrets.

But, there was one more memory, that simply didn't belong in that future. From the looks of it, it was at some point in Harry's third year, and it involved Sirius Black. Which is fine... but if I died in second year, how the bloody hell can I be alive in third year?

Harry looked about the memory. The 'e-mail' from Luna seemed to work like a Pensieve, allowing Harry to pause, rewind and fast-forward the memories.

Harry jabbed several buttons on the console, talking to another person, out of view in the memory, before Harry dropped to his knees, ripping a panel from the console.

He recognised the room as being a more advanced... more complete version of his Portkey box, but he didn't understand why he'd be using it with Sirius.

He pulled his head out of the console, shouting something, his face a mask of panic. He shouted a word at the other person, before pulling away from the console, which began to spit sparks as small

explosions rocked the surface. The glowing column at the centre of the console stopped, leaving the floor to rock. A flash of light...

The memory ended.

"Luna... what the bloody hell did you saddle me with?"

The following morning, Harry woke up early, before heading outside for a jog. After a mostly-sleepless night, he had a lot of energy to burn. He warmed up, before starting on a fairly high pace, jogging round the lake. He'd spent the night wondering how the Quidditch game could have killed him. Thanks to Hermione, he had Quidditch armour, with additional protective measures from Susan, Blaise and Padma for his birthday.

It's odd... the only way a Bludger could kill me is if it hit my head at full speed... but even Dobby wouldn't want to do that. He wants me at home, not dead. Silly bugger probably made a mistake with it. He made a mental note to keep a strong shield charm up whenever he was on his broom.

In the second vision, Penelope Clearwater was dead... but, it's odd. Nobody died the first time. Petrified, yes, but not dead. And why Penny? She was with Hermione... realisation slowly crept into his mind. Unless Hermione wasn't in the same place at the same time. It was her mirror that helped Penny. No Hermione equals dead Penny. Better keep an eye on that one, as well.

He circled the lake twice, before slowing to a walk to cool off. As he got to the doors, he noticed Luna stood there, watching him make his way back.

"Hello, Harry." She said dreamily.

"Luna. You're up early." Harry replied.

"So are you."

"Spot of exercise. Healthy body, healthy mind and all that... bollocks. How come you're up?"

“Oh, I don’t need a lot of sleep. If you’re up early enough, you may catch a glimpse of the Nargles.”

“Really?” Harry asked. “I thought they were mainly nocturnal. Don’t they follow the moon patterns?”

Luna’s face lit up with glee. “You read the Quibbler?”

Harry nodded. “Yes. You learn all sorts of things in that paper.”

“My daddy’s the editor. I do a lot of the research for him.”

“Sounds like fun. Didn’t I read that you’re going to be looking for the Crumple-Horned Snorcack next summer?”

Again, Luna’s face lit up and she nodded vigorously. “Yes. Me and daddy are going to look for them in Sweden. He’s very excited.”

“Try Greenland.” Harry suggested. “They prefer a slightly cooler climate.” He tried to give her the hint, without actually telling her she’d found them in 1999, hiding in Greenland.

“I’ll tell Daddy.” Luna said, humming happily to herself.

“Luna, would you like to join myself and Hermione for breakfast?”

Luna’s eyes cleared, as she stared at Harry intently for almost a minute. “I’m sorry, Harold, but I won’t be able to join your harem. I’m not that way inclined.”

Harry grinned, before turning it into a mock-pout. “Really? Are you sure? It could be fun...”

Her eyes glazed over again. “It’s strange, you know... all the futures that I can see have Hermione in them. In one, she’s your wife. In another, she’s your mistress, while you are in an Amortentia-fuelled relationship with Ginevra. In another, you are her slave. Another, she is your slave. However, there is always love between you.”

“Really?” Harry was impressed. “Cool.”

“There is something about you, Harry. You are not who you say you are, and yet you are. You do not belong here, and yet you do. You are an enigma, wrapped in a mystery and shrouded in confusion, and yet you are an open-book.”

Harry just grinned. “There’s worse things to be, Luna.”

“Yes.” Her eyes turned silver. “The seven deadly sins walk these halls, Harry. They shall be assembled when the Snake Lord returns. The seven virtues will need to be gathered. Six stand together now, with the seventh on the outside.”

Harry stepped closer, resting his hand on her arm. “Are you one of them, Luna?”

She swivelled her face towards him. “Like all beings, Harry Potter, I have the capacity for good and evil. I could be a sin or a virtue. Only when the choice is made will the future reveal itself.”

Nodding slightly, Harry lead her into the school. “Come on, Luna... let’s get something to eat.”

Luna wrinkled her nose. “Go and shower first, Harry. You smell.”

Chuckling to himself, Harry ambled back to his dorm room. “Love her or hate her... she’ll always tell you the truth.”

Harry showered and dressed, meeting up with Padma and Hermione in the common room, before heading back down to the Great Hall. On the way down the stairs, he met up with Neville and Susan. The quintet stopped in the entry way, waiting for Blaise to make his way up from the dungeons.

As the group of six entered the Great Hall, they ambled over to the Ravenclaw table, the other house members deciding to eat with the ‘Claws.

As they sat down, Harry noticed Luna standing near them, just out of range. Harry met each of his friends' eyes, flicking them slightly towards Luna. One by one they nodded, giving their approval. "Luna, come and join us."

She smiled warmly, a genuine smile, as she sat down next to Padma. "Thank you, Harry."

"Not a problem, Luna." Harry said, reaching for a platter of bacon. "So, remember at my party, I said we should start training?"

The five who were at the birthday party nodded, each giving a quick glance at the newcomer.

"Don't worry about me." Luna said. "I know you six are the ones who'll fight."

"No." Harry said. "We seven are the ones who'll fight."

Hermione glanced at him. "Harry?"

Luna placed her cutlery down. "You need to talk about me. It's okay. I'll leave."

Padma placed a hand on Luna's arm. "There's no need to run away... Luna, was it?" The blonde nodded. "We're not gonna bite."

"Not unless you ask us to." Blaise deadpanned, arching his eyebrow at the girl.

Luna turned her silver eyes on Blaise. "You're unique. You don't want people to get to know the real you. You're afraid if they do know you, they won't like you, so you hide behind impassiveness. You shouldn't, you know. Your friends, your true friends, will like you for you who are."

Harry covered his mouth with his napkin, not wanting to show off the manic grin he was wearing. Trust Luna to introduce her gift in the most... dazzling way she can.

The blonde turned to Neville. "Your mother's very proud of you, you know? She may not be able to show it, but she loves you, and wants to come back. She's fighting it, but the damage is severe. She will return to you in time, Neville. Be patient." She smiled at the group, and stood up. "If you'll excuse me?" She turned and skipped away.

The group, sans Harry, stared at each other in shock. Hermione was the first to speak. "I like her."

"She's... interesting." Blaise added.

"How... how does she know about..." Neville trailed off, as he realised carrying on with that sentence would lead to questions he really didn't want to answer.

"Ah, bless her." Harry said, finally wiping the grin off his face. "She's unique, isn't she?"

"She's odd." Padma said bluntly. "But... interesting."

"She's a Seer." Hermione said. "That's what you said last night, isn't it, Harry?"

"After she dumped a bloody vision of the future in my head, yeah." Harry groused. "I think she'll be useful to us. And a good friend." He looked down the Great Hall. "I get the feeling she's not had many friends in the past."

"Well... she's got six friends now." Susan said, daring her friends to contradict her.

Ah... Hufflepuff loyalty. Gotta love it. Harry thought, before beginning to shift uneasily in his seat. He looked up at Padma and Blaise, who were sitting on the opposite side of the table to him. "Pad'? Can you do me a favour?"

She nodded at him, quirking an eyebrow.

"Have a look at the Gryffindor table. Am I being stared at, by any chance?"

Nonchalantly, Padma looked up, glancing around the Great Hall, before sighing and carrying on with her breakfast. "Ron Weasley's staring holes in your back, and that new redhead in Gryffindor's staring at you. She looks like she's about to start dribbling."

Harry and Hermione shuddered together. "Ginny Weasley." Harry grumbled. "God damn it, I was hoping to avoid this."

"Ooh, is this gossip, Harry?" Susan asked, fluttering her eyelashes. "Share with the group."

Harry pouted at her for a moment. "Fred and George told me about her. Apparently, she's in love with the bloody 'Boy-Who-Lived', and thinks I'd make the perfect husband for her." He grimaced. "The fact that I'm in the top ten of richest families in Britain probably doesn't help matters, either."

"Ah, bless!" Padma cooed. "Is our 'ickle Harry afraid of the tiny little girl?"

When the little bitch uses Amortentia, yeah, I am. "Not at all," Harry replied, "because I have a secret weapon against stalker fan-girls."

Blaise smirked at Harry. "Do you?"

"Me." Hermione replied coolly. "If she makes a move on my boyfriend, she'll find herself in a world of hurt."

The group smirked at the thought for a moment, before seriousness raised its ugly head. "So... we include Luna, yeah?" Harry asked, getting nods from the rest. Blaise cocked an eyebrow.

"She should liven things up a little."

"That's one way of putting it." Harry mumbled. "Luna's nice, but she's very... direct. She'll say exactly what she means, regardless of who she's talking to. She said something else, though, when I saw her outside before." Harry offered, not sure about this at all. "She said 'the seven deadly sins walk these halls'. She also said 'the seven

virtues will need to be gathered. Six stand together now, with the seventh on the outside.' Do you guys think she meant us?"

Hermione was the first to respond. "Well... the seven deadly sins are Lust, Gluttony, Envy, Wrath, Pride, Sloth and Greed. Let's be honest, in a school full of teenagers, it's not exactly hard to find those things."

"I've heard of the seven deadly sins," Blaise said, "but not the virtues."

The group made various negative noises. A voice behind them called out. "The virtues will know who and what they are when the time is right."

"Luna, please don't sneak up on people." Harry said, the only one of the six who didn't jump when Luna spoke up. "Please, join us." She sat down next to Padma again, who smiled warmly at her.

"Welcome to our team, Luna." She said happily. "It's nice to meet you."

"Thank you." Luna replied dreamily. "It's... different, having friends."

The group grinned at her. "You'll not be alone again." Harry offered. "We'll stick together."

Another Author's Note: It's curious... In the 12 hours since I announced I've put a smutty version of one of my stories on my Yahoo group, 85 people have requested to join. That's compared to 52 in the entire month previously. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?

– CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE –

Stalkers and Celebrities

While the group was finishing their breakfast, Professor Flitwick approached Harry, handing out the class schedules. “Mr. Potter.”

Harry looked up. “Ah, Professor Flitwick. How are you this morning, sir?”

“I’m doing very well, Mr. Potter, thank you.” He passed over the schedule. “The Headmaster has asked to see you, Mr. Potter, when you’ve finished your breakfast. Since Charms is your first class, you have my permission to be late.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you, sir. I’ll be as quick as I can.”

Passing out the rest of the schedules, Flitwick made his way down the table.

“What is it about you, Harry?” Padma asked. “The second day here, and you’re called to the Headmaster’s office.”

Harry grinned. “Well, I can predict, with a reasonable amount of certainty, that he has two questions for me; one, what the hell happened during the Sorting ceremony last night, and two, how the hell did I manage to Portkey into Hogwarts, considering that he didn’t make the Portkey.”

“Both valid questions.” Blaise said, arching an eyebrow at his friend.

“Yes, they are.” Harry said, smiling slightly.

“You’re not gonna tell us, are you?” Susan asked, pouting.

“Maybe someday.” Harry replied, making the others groan.

Padma turned to Luna. “What about you, Luna? Care to explain what happened last night?”

“No. Not really.” Luna replied dreamily.

“Luna.” Harry said, nodding slightly at her.

“Fine.” Luna replied, rolling her eyes. “Harry is... different, than everyone else at Hogwarts.”

“True.” Hermione said, winking at her boyfriend.

“He’s... ‘Chosen’, for lack of a better phrase. Fate both likes him, and detests him. So, Fate used me to pass some information that he will need.”

“Yep, that’s me.” Harry sighed dramatically. “Fate’s Bitch.”

“She prefers to think of you as her ‘Minion’, not her ‘Bitch’.” Luna replied, smiling slightly. “I get these... flashes, sometimes. People, events, places. Things that need to be done, and things that need to be stopped. Since Harry is one of the nexus points of space and time, it’s necessary for me to pass these flashes on to him.”

“And cause a migraine, too.” Harry muttered.

“You’re ‘Chosen’?” Blaise asked. “Is that how you managed to assault that Troll last year?”

“Yeah, I’ve been wondering about that, too.” Susan asked. “I’ve heard the rumours, and I saw that weird little memory show spell you did, but I don’t understand it.”

“I heard people talk about it in the common room last night.” Luna added. “Apparently, it’s quite famous here.”

“Uh... well, it’s kinda... difficult to explain.” Harry replied, looking a bit confused. “In basic terms, I infused my body with magic.”

“But... you’re a wizard. Your body’s always infused with magic.”

“No.” Harry corrected gently. “As a wizard, my body has magic flowing through it. What I did was to infuse every cell with raw magic.

For a brief time, my body was harder than diamond, and I was equally strong. There are, however, two rather drastic problems with doing it.”

“Which are?” Hermione and Padma asked together, with Luna a close second. Ravenclaws...

“Well, I’ve done it before, and I timed it. I can only hold the power for just under five seconds. And secondly, it’s extremely draining. I ate nearly a week’s worth of food after that fight. It burns up your reserves like you wouldn’t believe.”

“So, it’s useful in a one-on-one fight, but during battle it’s a hazard?” Blaise concluded. “Makes sense you’d use it against the troll.”

“Can anyone do it?” Neville asked quietly.

Harry shrugged. “I suppose so. It’s difficult to begin with, ‘cause your body doesn’t want to change like that. And it’s dependant on your power level. The more powerful you are, the longer you can hold it. If someone’s too low on power, they probably couldn’t do it.”

“Hmm.” Hermione had discretely pulled out a quill and parchment, and was scribbling notes.

Harry finished his mug of tea, and stood up. “I’ll see you guys later. Better go and see what his Headliness wants.”

“Ah, Harry! Won’t you come in? Lemon drop?” Dumbledore offered.

“Thank you, sir. No. I’ve just finished breakfast.” Harry replied as he sat down. “You asked to see me, sir?”

Dumbledore nodded, leaning back in his chair and sucking on a lemon drop. “I did, my boy, yes. First of all, you’ve settled in, have you?”

Harry rolled his eyes discretely. “Sir, I’m missing Charms for this meeting. What was it you wished to speak to me about?”

“Very well, Harry. I would like to talk about your encounter with Miss Lovegood during the Sorting last night.”

“Really, sir? I admit, it was an odd way for her to introduce herself to me, but I think she accomplished that quite nicely.”

“I need to know what it was she showed you, Harry. If you have information, you will need to share it with me for the Greater Good. I need to know.”

“With respect, sir, you don’t need to know. That information was passed to me in confidence, and I will treat it as such. I’m sorry if that response upsets you, Professor, but I have no choice in the matter. For the Greater Good, the information must be kept secret.”

Dumbledore frowned. Harry had turned his favourite reason back on him! “Harry, I must insist. Anything that affects the students of this school is my business, and I need to know.”

“In your opinion, sir, you need to know. That opinion is not mine, and I will not share. I have told you, several times now, that I will share pertinent information with you at the appropriate time. This is not that time.”

Dumbledore’s tone was cool. “And do you believe that you’re the best person to decide what information is ‘pertinent’?”

“Yes.” Harry replied simply, leaning back in his chair.

Dumbledore sighed heavily. “Harry, I have tried to explain to you that I work for the Greater Good. As such, I need this information, in order to make sure that the Greater Good is served.”

Harry shook his head. “One day, Headmaster, you and I shall have a conversation about the ‘Greater Good’. Again, however, this is not that time. Is there anything else you wish to discuss, or can I go to Charms now?”

“I will agree to put this on the back burner for the moment, Mr. Potter, but I will get this information.” Dumbledore replied sternly.

“You’re welcome to try, Headmaster.”

“My second query was with regards to your arrival last night.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. That... device. What was it?”

“Need-to-know, Headmaster.” Harry replied. “You don’t have one.”

“Any object that can penetrate the defences of this school, Mr. Potter, needs to be confiscated and studied. In this instance, your opinion of whether I need to know or not is irrelevant.”

“No, it isn’t. The Box allowed me to travel to school when I missed the train. Unlike Weasley, we were not seen by Muggles, and have not broken the Statute of Secrecy. As for penetrating the school’s defences, we did not. The school allowed us access.”

“I did not authorise your transit, Mr. Potter.”

“The school did, Headmaster. In this instance, your approval is irrelevant.”

Dumbledore sighed. Why couldn’t he just buckle down and be a good weapon? “I really must insist, Mr. Potter.”

“Yes, ‘cause that’s worked for you in the past, Headmaster.” Harry replied calmly.

“Where is the device now?” Dumbledore asked.

“It’s in my dorm room, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Very well, Harry. You’re dismissed. Hurry along to class, now.”

Harry stood, nodded slightly, and headed out of the door. He’d be willing to bet every Knut of the Potter fortune that Dumbledore would

shortly be making his way to the Ravenclaw Second Years dorms. He'd be in for a little surprise...

Harry ambled down the corridor briskly, heading for Charms class. Unfortunately, Charms was a four-house class, meaning he had to put up with annoying Gryffindors (Weasley and Finnegan) and the irritating Slytherins (Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Davis... hell, all of them except Blaise). He entered the class, interrupting Flitwick's lecture. He quickly sat down in between Padma and Hermione, and dug out parchment and quill.

"Sir?" Malfoy's irritating whine spoke up.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy?" Flitwick looked up at the interruption from the blonde ponce.

"Aren't you going to punish Potter, sir, for being late?"

"How is that any business of yours, Mr. Malfoy?" Flitwick's tone was cool at Malfoy's presumption.

"You're showing favouritism to your house, sir. He was late. He should get a detention, or at least lose points."

Harry looked up at Malfoy, seeing the blonde smirk at him. Yeah, you know what favouritism is, don't you, Ferret? Snape would have probably awarded you points if you came in late, while stripping the rest of the houses of their points.

"Perhaps, Mr. Malfoy, you should mind your own business. I know why Mr. Potter was late, and that is not something that you need to know. Focus on your own task, Mr. Malfoy, and allow me to focus on mine."

Go, Flitwick! Go, Flitwick! Harry sang mentally, winking gleefully at Malfoy, who glared mincingly at him.

"So, what did Dumbledore want?" Hermione whispered after a few moments.

“As I said at brekkie. He wants to know about the Portkey box. He asked me where it was. It’s in my dorm room, sitting in a corner. He’s probably up there right now.”

“What?” Hermione hissed loudly, causing Flitwick to look up at her, one eyebrow raised. “Sorry.” She waited until Flitwick was carrying on with his lecture, before turning back to Harry. “And you’re just letting him rummage around?”

Harry shrugged. “Well, yeah. It’s not as though he can get inside. The magi-lock on the door will keep him out. At the moment, only you and I can get inside. Even then, it wouldn’t do him any good, since he wouldn’t know how to work the technology, and it’s blood-bound to me.”

Hermione nodded at him uncertainly, before getting back to taking notes.

The charms class lasted all morning. As soon as the lesson finished, the six friends left the room, heading for the Great Hall for Lunch, before their Defence against the Dark Arts class immediately afterwards. Harry was looking forward to this, for obvious reasons.

They settled in at the Ravenclaw table, grabbing sandwiches and juice, apart from Harry who grabbed two pots of tea. As they started to eat, Harry sensed Luna approaching, then stopping a few feet away. “Come on, Luna. Sit down.” He called out.

With a small smile, Luna sat on the bench next to Hermione, who grinned at the younger girl. “Stop flinching, Luna. We’re not going to attack you.”

She nodded, and reached for a sandwich.

“Looking forward to DADA, girls?” Harry asked after he’d demolished two sandwiches. Predictably, Susan blushed prettily, followed by Padma. “I’ll take that as a yes, then.”

“It’s just... he’s so famous. And handsome!” Susan sighed.

Harry, Blaise and Neville rolled their eyes and one, before grinning.

“Excuse me!” A voice called excitedly from behind Harry.

A flash of bright white light, and the smell of rotten eggs, greeted Harry, as he turned round. His wand was in hand and stunning curse on his lips, when he realised what it was.

“Hi, Harry!” A hyperactive voice near-shouted in front of him.

Colin Fucking Creepy! I mean ‘Creevey’. Shit... I forgot about him. “Uh... one minute. I’m blind at the moment.” Harry replied, closing his eyes. “While I’m waiting for my vision to return, why don’t you tell me who the hell you are, and why you felt a need to try and blind me?”

“Oh, I’m Colin. Colin Creevey.”

“Well, Colin Colin Creevey. I’d say it’s nice to see you, but that would be a lie since I’m blind thanks to your sterling efforts.”

“Harry.” Hermione’s voice said coolly. “Be nice to the creepy stalker.”

“I just wanted to take your picture.” Colin said defensively, a bit put out by the seven people in front of him glaring at him. Well, six people glaring at him, and one blinking furiously.

“Look, Colin Colin,” Harry said, now seeing vague shapes in front of him, “did it ever occur to you to ask for a photo, instead of sticking your camera in my face?”

“Uh... no?”

Saints preserve us. “Well, now you know. Please, feel free to walk away before I can see you well enough to hex you.”

Creevey gathered the tattered remnants of his courage. “I... I was hoping I could take a picture of you, and then you could sign it for me.”

Hell, no! “Well, Colin, as much fun as that wouldn’t be, I have to refuse. I don’t do signed photos. Or photos. Or signatures. Sorry.”

“Signed photos, Potter?” A new voice entered the conversation.

“Oh, joy. Bad faith. Something you want, ferret, or are you looking for a signed photo, too?”

“Signed photos? Who’s giving out signed photos?” The fake, foppish voice of the Great Pretender entered the area.

“Good god, am I being stalked by weirdos?” Harry whispered to Hermione.

“Ah, shouldn’t need to ask. Harry Potter... we meet at last.”

“Too bloody soon.” Harry muttered.

“Tell you what, Mr. Creevey, why don’t you take a picture of the both of us, and we’ll both sign it, eh? Can’t ask for more than that, can you?” Lockhart draped his arm across Harry’s shoulder.

Colin nodded uncertainly, seeing the thunderous look on Harry’s face, and raised his camera.

“Creevey, your finger touches that button, and I’ll shove your wand so far up your arse, it’ll pick your nose, and give your brain pan, such as it is, a much overdue cleaning. Are we... perfectly... clear?”

Colin nodded, before turning tail and running from the Great Hall.

“Why are you touching me?” Harry suddenly demanded of Lockhart. “I don’t know you, and you’re draping yourself all over me. Is there a reason?”

“Come with me, Harry.” Lockhart said, trying unsuccessfully to sound authoritative.

“Well, I usually get dinner first, Professor. I don’t know what rumours you’ve heard, but I don’t just go off with strange men.” He ripped

Lockhart's arm off his shoulder, and took a couple of steps away, standing next to Hermione.

"I was covering for you back there with young Creevey, Harry. If he took a picture of the two of us together, it wouldn't look so bad. Giving out signed photos at this stage of your career... looks a tad bigheaded."

Harry shook his head in disbelief. "Had I given out a signed photograph, Professor, your rebuke may have some merit. Since I didn't, it's rather pointless." He glared at Lockhart. "And, on the off chance I were to start handing out signed photographs, why on earth would I want to be in one with you?"

"Harry, Harry, Harry... don't you understand? I'm trying to help you, here."

"I neither need or require your help, Professor." Harry retorted, watching the older man look at him with puzzlement. Sweet Merlin... the silly bugger doesn't get it. Prick. "Don't you have anything better to do than chase me round? Like leave? I'm sure there's some other small boy in this castle you can go and grope." Harry turned his back on Lockhart, and started to walk away with his friends. As Harry left the Great Hall, a flash of light from the main staircase caught his attention.

"Creevey!" Harry spat, watching the younger boy run in terror.

"Ah, children today, eh, Harry?" Blaise asked quietly.

"Blaise, have I told you recently how much I really don't like you?" Harry retorted instantly.

"Ooh, not for..." Blaise sucked air through his teeth, "almost three hours, now."

"So, I'm way overdue. I hate you, Blaise."

"Aw... give us a kiss, Harry." Blaise mocked, before taking a subtle step back upon seeing Harry's glare. "I didn't think photographers would put you in a bad mood."

"Hey, I have no problem with photographers. They're just like every other psychopath. If I could think of a way of killing them without being caught, I'd happily comply."

Hermione took his hand, squeezing softly. "Come on, Harry. Calm down."

The group started to amble towards the library, one of the few areas they could gather together outside of lessons and the Great Hall. "Honestly... photographers, solicitors and taxmen... should kill them all for the good of the species." He muttered as he stalked along the corridor.

"Harry." Hermione said reprovably.

"And poncey gits!" He called suddenly, glancing over his shoulder. As expected, Lockhart looked up, locking gazes with Harry. He turned to Hermione. "You see? He answered to it! Proof!"

"You're planning on destroying him, aren't you?" Luna asked, out of the blue.

"Well... yeah." Harry said.

Hermione reached up with her free hand, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "Are you gonna leave anything? Any traces?"

Harry pondered the question. "I'll leave enough gristle for us all to piss on. That work for you?"

"Why, though, Harry?" Susan's quiet, soft voice called up from the back of the group. "I mean... he's done so much good! Haven't you read his books?"

Repressing a snigger, Harry stopped, and turned to face Susan. "Yes, I have. Marvellous works of fiction they are, too."

"Fiction?" The ladies asked.

"Oh, please!" Harry said mockingly. "Do you really believe that man could face down a banshee? I bet he's piss his pants if he came face-to-face with a werewolf." He snorted. "Christ, he'd piss himself if he came face-to-face with Crookshanks." Harry pondered for a moment. "Although, I can certainly understand that one."

"Harry, my cat is not evil." Hermione said sternly.

"Of course, dear." Harry said patronisingly, patting the top of her head. "He's just... misunderstood, right?"

"Oh, honestly." Hermione scolded. "He's a perfectly agreeable cat."

"Yeah, provided he's not agreeing with me." Harry muttered, getting a rap on the back of his head from his girlfriend.

"So... you think Lockhart's a fake?" Susan asked, looking upset.

"I didn't say that." Harry answered. I know it, but I won't say it... yet.

The group carried on down the halls, until they entered the library. As Harry passed over the threshold, another flash went off. "Right, that's it!" Harry snarled. "Accio Creepy Little Stalker!"

True to form, Colin flew through the air, only to land in a pile at Harry's feet. Harry picked him up, physically holding him in the air, while he snarled into his face. "Did you not listen to me when I said you should ask for a photo?"

"Y-Yes." Colin squeaked.

"So, tell me why you feel a need to take a picture of me, not once but twice, less than ten minutes later?"

"I-I-I was hoping to catch you unawares..." Colin stammered.

Hermione placed a hand on Harry's arm, the simple touch calming him down. He looked at her, watching her shake her head slightly, before he looked back at Colin. "Fine. You can take two pictures. One of me and Hermione, and one of the seven of us."

The group assembled and posed, watching as the CLS took the pictures. He was about to dash away, when Harry grabbed his wrist. "Oh, and Colin?"

"Yes?" Colin trembled.

"If I find those pictures in the Daily Prophet or them being given to anyone else, I will emasculate you on general principle. Are we clear?"

Colin's head bobbed up and down, making him look like Dobby.

"Excellent. I'll give you five sickles for two copies of me and Hermione, and seven copies of the group shot. And the negatives." Harry smiled winningly, showing a lot of teeth, and chuckled when Colin dashed away.

"You're cruel to that poor boy." Susan said reprovingly.

"Creepy little stalker." Harry and Hermione said together. They made their way over to the group's table, slumping into place.

"Harry?" Blaise asked.

"Hmm?"

"What was that odd... contraption thing that you arrived in last night?"

"Yeah, I was wondering that, too." Padma added.

Hermione let out an uncharacteristic giggle. "It was fun."

Harry turned to stare at her. "'Fun'? That's all you can say? 'Fun'?" He clucked his tongue. "Hermione, I'm shocked. Shocked and dismayed."

As a sterling example of maturity, Hermione stuck her tongue out at Harry, who just crossed his eyes at her. "Well, explain it then."

"That, Ladies, Gentlemen and Blaise," Harry winked at his friend, who gave him the finger, "was a dimensionally transcendental, runically-powered armoured Portkey transit device."

"Huh?" was the general response.

Harry scratched his head. "It's a very fancy Portkey." He explained after a moment. "But, with mine, you don't end up splattered on the ground in an undignified heap."

"Ah."

"How does it work?" Padma asked. "I mean, I've used Portkeys before, but I've never seen anything like that."

Not surprising... half of the technology and magical theory hasn't been invented yet. "Inside the box is a console, which is a Portkey. The Portkey activates, dragging the box, and anything inside it, to wherever it needs to go." He smiled. "And it's currently sitting up in my dorm room, with Professor Dumbledore trying to get inside it."

Luna looked at him. "Aren't you going to stop him?"

"Did ya notice the word 'trying'?" Harry asked, grinning. "He can't get in. The box won't let him. I just hope he doesn't try and blast his way in. He'll make a bloody mess in my dorm room."

"You said 'runically-powered'. How did you do that?" Padma asked.

Ravenclaws... at least it's better than listening to gossip about Teen Witch bloody Weekly like her sister... "I've used Runes to make a sort of magical reactor in the heart of the console. I was originally going to use antimatter reaction technology, but I figured that probably wasn't the best solution."

"What's antimatter?" Blaise asked.

At that point, what Harry had said filtered through Hermione's brain, causing her to shriek in protest. "Are you serious? You were thinking of using antimatter?" She stared at him. "Where the hell would you get it from?"

Harry looked at her oddly for a moment. "Kent State University in Ohio. They're the ones who've been working with it."

"You'd blow up the school!" Hermione exclaimed loudly, getting loud clucks from Madam Pince.

"No, I wouldn't." Harry replied, shaking his head and chuckling. "No, with the amount of antimatter needed, it'd more likely destroy Scotland."

Hermione was about to start at least a thirty-minute rant, then thought better of it. Since he hadn't used such a dangerous power supply, there wasn't really any point.

Harry turned his attention onto Luna. "So, how was your first class?"

The blonde smiled at him. "It was... interesting. Did you know Professor McGonagall's actually a cat, and only acts human?"

Hermione was about to correct her, but Harry smoothly interjected. "We know. She's a devious little kitty, isn't she?"

Grinning, Luna nodded. "Yes... it's often been suspected that some of the staff at Hogwarts are actually animals masquerading as human. The Potions Master's an animal, too."

"Bat." The other six said in unison, causing Luna to smile widely.

"You're gonna fit right in, Luna..." Padma said, wrapping an arm around the younger girl's shoulders. "Right in."

Harry glanced at his watch, noting that there was fifteen minutes of lunch left. "Before we head off to class, there's something else we need to talk about. D'you remember on my birthday, I said we'd start

on some training?" The group nodded. "The first thing we should work on is Occlumency, 'cause frankly, Snape is completely untrustworthy. He routinely scans students, just by looking into their eyes. So, after dinner, we'll meet up in the common room, and get started." He gestured to the shelves. "There's some books that will come in useful. We should get those."

"Who's common room?" Susan asked.

"Well, out of the seven of us, four of us are Ravenclaws, so it makes sense to use ours." Harry pointed out reasonably. He led the others to the books they'd need, signed them out, and headed off to class.

Harry had been looking forward to this ever since he'd arrived back in the past, over a year ago. The chance to irritate Gilded-Balls Flophart was just too tempting to pass up.

He sat in the very front of the class, doing his best to look studious and attentive. To his delight, Second Year DADA was held with the Gryffindors, so he had ample opportunity to annoy Ron Weasley, and set him up for embarrassing incidents. Really, he couldn't ask for better.

Hermione took the seat next to him, with Padma and Neville on the seats behind them. Without warning, Harry suddenly cackled, rubbing his hands together, making the other students near him jump in surprise.

"Behave!" Hermione snapped, swatting his shoulder.

"But, Hermione..." He whined playfully, "I'm just so excited to be meeting such a... fine figure of a wizard."

Hermione just started rubbing the top of her nose again. "Should have stayed in bed this morning..."

The door to the office opened, and Lockhart stepped out, resplendent in his fine yellow robes. "Good morning, all."

Harry grunted.

"I see you all bought a complete collection of my books!" Lockhart crowed, looking around the room.

"Considering we didn't have any bloody choice..." Harry muttered, just loud enough for Lockhart to hear him, but quietly enough for Lockhart to dismiss it.

"Well, let's get started." He grabbed Hermione's copy of Gadding with Ghouls. "Me. Gilderoy Lockhart. Order of Merlin, 3rd-class, Honorary member of the Dark Force Defence League-

"Only 'cause you're not actually qualified to be a proper member..." Harry muttered, again just loud enough for Lockhart to hear.

"And five times winner of Witch Weekly's most charming smile award!" He smiled at them, showing off his perfect teeth.

Harry leaned in close to Hermione. "How, exactly, does that qualify him to teach Defence against the Dark Arts?" She shrugged.

"But, enough about that!" Lockhart said suddenly, turning round to smile charmingly at the class. "I didn't defeat the Bandon Banshee-

"At all." Harry muttered.

"...by smiling at her." He waited a moment for them to laugh. None did. He cleared his throat nervously.

"Before we get started on today's lesson, I thought we could have a little quiz, to see how much of my books you've managed to remember."

"Joy." Harry deadpanned loudly.

"Ah, Mr. Potter, I'm glad to see that you're eager." Lockhart complimented, smiling at the more-famous child.

"If that's the way you want to interpret it, Professor, don't let me stop you." Harry replied, smiling thinly at the fop.

Lockhart was confused for a moment, but then brushed it aside. He handed out the papers, letting people take one and then pass them back.

"You have thirty minutes to answer the questions. I'm sure I could find some house points for the winner."

"Ooh!" Neville and Harry mocked in unison.

"Begin!"

Harry opened the parchment, and started to write his answers. For the most part, he didn't really give a shit what the useless fraud thought of him, but he was oddly proud of some of his answers. When Lockhart called out "Time!" he made a duplication of his questionnaire, and sent it back up to Lockhart.

Lockhart sat patiently, reading through the quizzes. By a strange coincidence, Harry's quiz was the bottom of the pile. As he was reading through, marking them, he began making odd comments.

"Hardly any of you remembered that my favourite colour is lilac... What..." He looked up. "Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, Professor?" Harry replied innocently.

"What's this?" Lockhart held up the quiz.

"My answers, sir."

"I don't think this is quite right, do you?" Lockhart gazed at the young man with a pathetic expression.

Harry smiled dangerously. "The answers may not be what you have written in your books, Professor, but I don't believe them to be inaccurate." He reached into his robes, and pulled out the duplicated parchment. He quickly read them through. "I don't see a problem here, sir."

Gilderoy's face became red. "You... you don't see a problem?"

"No, sir. I'll tell you what, sir. Instead of reading them all out, how about I just copy it for the entire class to read, sir? That way, we can carry on with the lesson."

Harry flicked his wand, sending a copy of the parchment to every student. Unknown to Lockhart, it was to every student in the school.

Hermione received her parchment, and quickly read through it. Several statements stuck into her mind as she read Harry's 'answers'.

What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favourite colour?

Anything that doesn't clash with his long, flowing blonde locks... poncey git.

What is Gilderoy Lockhart's secret ambition?

To own the largest harem of little boys the world has ever known. From what I've heard, he's currently in second place.

What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy Lockhart's greatest achievement to date?

Creating a series of books that are so expensive, it would bankrupt several small countries, and then successfully getting them part of a mandatory reading list.

What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favourite animal?

Anything that has achieved something and is susceptible to a memory charm.

What is Gilderoy Lockhart's advice to young celebrities?

Carry a big stick and pummel irritating questionnaire writers.

What is the most important thing to remember when facing a Dark creature?

Only face an enemy whose name can be used with some alliteration to create an irritating book title.

Has Gilderoy Lockhart ever suffered from any illnesses?

Well, he's afflicted with verbal diarrhoea, but he isn't the one who's suffering.

What is Gilderoy Lockhart's Favourite Spell?

I can't remember... isn't that a clue?

Where was Gilderoy Lockhart born?

In a box near the fire. His mother probably barked during the whole thing.

How did Gilderoy Lockhart track down the Gladstone Ghoul?

He went to where the Ghoul was reported, and asked someone... high-tech, or what?

How many people did Gilderoy Lockhart save during his encounter with the Ghoul?

I'm so sorry... fell asleep. What was that?

How did Gilderoy Lockhart defeat the Gladstone Ghoul?

According to his book, he used a Reducto curse. However, we all know that ghouls cannot be harmed with a Reducto curse. So, the question becomes, how did Albrahim Meyer (the wizard who did defeat the ghoul) do it?

What is Gilderoy Lockhart's recommendation for preventing hair-mussing when facing ghouls?

Severus Snape's Slime-It-Down hair gel. Guaranteed to style it or dissolve your hair, or your money back!

What was the charm used to defeat the Wagga Wagga werewolf in Wandering with Werewolves?

Well, it sure as hell wasn't his natural charm. Personally, I reckon the werewolf saw the git had bigger teeth than him and ran away. I know I want to. Far, far away...

What has Gilderoy Lockhart found to be the best use of the Homorphous Charm?

Selling barely-literate, high-priced dodgy fiction to schoolchildren with mandatory booklists.

What is the best way to deal with a werewolf on a rampage?

Be 35,000 feet in the air on a Muggle plane; werewolves tend to have issues at customs.

How was Gilderoy Lockhart able to defeat the Werewolf in Hand-to-Hand combat?

Is this question for real? A werewolf, a creature with far superior strength to a human, and he thinks he can beat it in hand-to-hand? More likely the werewolf saw him coming and fell over laughing.

What was the secret weapon Gilderoy Lockhart used to defeat the Yeti?

While hanging upside down in the Yeti's lair, he used the Force to summon his lightsaber, before chopping off the Yeti's arm... hang on, no, that's Star Wars... Huh...

How did Gilderoy Lockhart track down the terrible Yeti?

He asked the villagers. Moron.

How did Gilderoy Lockhart defeat the Yeti?

He shit his pants when he saw it. The stench of bowel-loosening terror killed the Yeti. Poor thing...

How does Gilderoy Lockhart recommend keeping a perfect manicure when facing a Yeti?

Well, I don't know about Flophart, but I would recommend, if fighting for your life against a Yeti, that worrying about your bloody cuticles is a waste of time. Although, moisturising is supposed to help.

What Spell did Gilderoy Lockhart use to gain access to the Banshee's lair?

Early morning breath that could cut through bank vaults.

How did Gilderoy Lockhart defeat the Bandon Banshee's right-hand minion?

Flash blindness from those bloody awful aquamarine robes.

How did Gilderoy Lockhart defeat the Bandon Banshee?

Well, he was gonna try and gag her with his manhood, but the damn thing's so tiny, it could only be used to floss her teeth. On the plus side, she now has a better smile than he does.

In Voyages with Vampires, how did Gilderoy Lockhart defeat the Leader of the Vampires?

He ate some garlic bread, and forgot to brush those huge chompers. The stench managed to make the leader of the vampires keel over.

What curse did Gilderoy Lockhart cure the Transylvanian villagers from?

Himself. He left. The villagers cheered, and made mad passionate love to all the animals in the area. Gilderoy was jealous when he found out, 'cause he missed out of the sheep.

How does Gilderoy Lockhart recommend keeping your robes wrinkle-free during a confrontation with a Vampire?

Albus Fondlemore's Sticky Semen Starch – guaranteed to make your robes hard as diamond, or a full refund!

What was the Secret Spell Gilderoy Lockhart used to defeat the Vampire Clan?

A secret... only known to the Romanian Warlock who defeated the Vampire clan. If it was told to everyone, it wouldn't be a bloody secret, would it? You're really a bit of an arse, aren't you?

How many lives has Gilderoy Lockhart saved in his adventures?

I was unaware the Gilderoy Lockhart's saved anyone. I must have blinked and missed it.

When is Gilderoy Lockhart's birthday, and what would his ideal birthday gift be?

I don't care, and his ideal birthday gift would be to have the bloody day named after him.

With a muffled sigh, she looked over at Harry, who was grinning at her. She nodded her head in grudging acceptance, before turning back to Lockhart.

"Hmm... Well, Miss Granger scored the highest marks on the test, by getting every answer correct. So, ten points to Miss Granger."

"Thank you, sir." Hermione replied dutifully.

"So... to business. My job is to prepare you all to face the darkest and most deadly creatures in the world! You may find yourselves facing your worst terror in this room-"

"We already are." Harry muttered, making Neville snigger behind him.

"You should all know that as long as I am here, no harm will come to you." Lockhart completed smoothly.

"Of course not. Anything that comes for us will pick on him first, since he's so weak." Harry grumbled. "And he's supposed to teach us... pathetic."

Hermione elbowed him, causing him to yelp. He glared at her, before deciding to tone down on the ribbing.

"I have brought a group of creatures to class today... they're very dangerous. If you scream, they may attack us!" He made his way over to a cage on his desk, which was shaking slightly.

"Behold!" He ripped the cover off, revealing a cage full of electric-blue creatures, each one about six inches tall, and slightly satanic-looking.

"Pixies!" Seamus Finnegan laughed. "You think Pixies are dangerous?"

Lockhart smirked. "Let's see how you deal with them then!" He called out, flicking the door of the cage open. The pixies, not being as stupid as Lockhart, made their break for freedom, deciding to trash the classroom before departure. Every student, bar one, leapt under their desk to escape the little menaces.

Hermione glanced up, seeing Harry sat casually at his desk, reading through one of his textbooks. "Harry!" She hissed.

"Hmm?" Harry asked, looking down at her. "What are you doing down there?"

"The Pixies!" Hermione shot back, ducking as a low-flying pixie nearly hit her.

Harry glanced round the room, noting the pixies wreaking havoc. To Harry's glee, they'd grabbed Ron Weasley by the robes, hauling him up to the ceiling, so he could dangle from the large dinosaur skeleton hanging there. "Yes, they look to be having fun, don't they?"

“Why aren’t they bothering you?” Hermione asked, drawing her wand.

“Notice-me-not charm, keyed to them.” Harry replied, going back to his book. Without looking, he drew his wand, tapping it on Hermione’s head, then flicking it twice behind him, casting the charm on Neville and Padma.

“We should help the others.” Hermione said, glancing around the room.

“Well... yeah, we could.” Harry said reasonably. “Or, we could watch the pixies pick on Weasley.” He leaned back in his chair. “I know which one I pick.”

“Weasley.” Neville and Padma replied, slipping back into their seats.

Hermione just huffed and rolled her eyes, but sat back down. The rest of the combined Gryffindor/Ravenclaw class stared at them, before ducking and rolling again from the pixies.

“If you four would just nip them back into their cage?” Lockhart said from under his desk, where he’d taken refuge after the pixies had stolen his wand.

Hermione turned to Harry. “The Immobulus charm should work here.” She was about to cast it, when Harry placed his hand on her wrist, grinning at her.

“This’ll probably work better.” He said. He stood, letting loose a shrill whistle through his teeth. To the astonishment of everyone, bar Harry, the Pixies stopped dashing around the room, staring at the being that had caught their notice.

“Attention!” Harry barked. The Pixies flew to Harry’s desk and stood there, in three ranks of four.

“Right face!” The Pixies turned to their right.

At this point, Harry's activities had caught the attention of the class. They'd tried to fight off the Pixies, only for a little drip like Potter to get them to obey his orders.

"Potter!" Ron shouted, still hanging from the skeleton. "Get me down!"

Harry looked up with a smirk. "Sorry, Weasley... can't help you." He turned back to the Pixies. "Return to your cage! I'll take you down to Hagrid's later, so he can let you free!"

The Pixies, with a small amount of grumbling, took off, flying neatly back to their cage, where they resumed their parade ground rest.

Lockhart looked up from under his desk, seeing the danger had passed. The other students were warily climbing into their seats. "E-Excellent work, Mr. Potter..." He stammered. "Five points to Ravenclaw."

Harry nodded. "Thank you." He said politely.

"For homework, describe how you would have defeated the Pixie invasion." Gilderoy smirked, before releasing the class.

As the group was leaving, Harry burst out laughing. "Pixie 'invasion'? That man's lost the plot... I mean, seriously. He calls a dozen mischievous little pixies as an 'invasion'?"

Harry led Hermione, Neville and Padma away from the classroom, only to stop when he came face-to-face with an irate Ron Weasley and Seamus Finnegan. In his hands, the cage of Pixies watched the confrontation with mischievous glee.

"Potter!" Ron snarled. "Why didn't you get me down?"

Harry smiled innocently. "You're a wizard, Weasley. Why couldn't you get yourself down?"

Ron blushed, but kept up his assault. "They took my wand!"

“So why didn’t you get Finnegan there to help you down? Why should I get off my arse to help you? You’ve been nothing but rude to me since I arrived here.”

Finnegan snarled. “You’ve been rude and arrogant, Potter! Parading around as if you’re better than everyone else here.”

Harry raised an eyebrow as he stared coolly at Seamus. The Irishman had been a fickle friend the first time around, and was proving to be a bit of an arse in this incarnation. “You can think what you want, Finnegan. Your opinion really doesn’t mean shit to me.”

He was about to turn and walk away, when a thought occurred. “How did your trip go, Weasley? I understand you managed to destroy your Dad’s car, and get him a fine. What’s the matter? Can’t drive? Or are you just completely incompetent?”

Ron’s wand was in hand, and Harry saw the spell-o-tape holding it together. He tutted. “Shame... nice wand like that... I hope it doesn’t backfire on you.”

“Eat slugs!” Ron intoned, flicking his wand. Just like last time, the spell-back fired, covering Ron with a sickly green light as he flew backwards. He opened his mouth to complain, only to have a six inch long slug fly out of his mouth.

Harry, Neville and Padma were on their knees, howling with laughter, while Hermione stood staring at the sight, a small grin battling to show itself on her face.

Seamus leaned down to come to his friend’s aid, when another barrage of slugs erupted over his shoes. Harry started crying as his ribs protested, but he couldn’t stop laughing. Seamus finished pulling Ron to his feet and leading him to the hospital wing.

Almost ten minutes later, Harry had himself under control. “Man... where’s Colin with his camera when you really need him?” With the odd chuckle here and there, Harry picked up the cage of Pixies, and led his way outside.

After dropping off the Pixies, and retreating from Hagrid's offer of rock cakes, Harry disappeared into the kitchens. The House Elves quickly packaged up a basket of food for him, which he took back to the Ravenclaw common room. As he passed through, he saw his friends waiting on the sofas near the fire.

Making his way up to the dorm room, he dropped the basket onto his bed, and quickly scribbled a short note.

Dear Padfoot,

Enclosed is another basket of food for you. I trust that you're keeping yourself well, and not dwelling too much on your confinement. I know the Dementors can be a bitch to deal with, but focussing on something else can help save your sanity. Speaking of which, 17 Down, four letters: "elongated, soft-bodied invertebrate". It's been baffling me for ages... Keep the faith, Sirius.

Stripeclaw

He slapped the parchment onto the basket with a sticking charm, then turned the basket into a Portkey. With a tap of his wand, he sent it on it's way.

That reminds me... I'll need to get working on Grimmauld Place at some point this summer. When he breaks out, he'll need a safe place to go... Shit... need to deal with Kreacher. Little traitorous bastard... With those cheery thoughts in mind, Harry descended the stairs to the common room. He slumped on the sofa next to Hermione, taking her hand in his automatically. The touch calmed him, allowing him to speak to his friends without snapping.

"So... you're going to teach us Occlumency?" Blaise asked. "I've heard about it from my father. Apparently, it's an extremely potent discipline, and takes years to learn."

Harry nodded. "Yeah... I think we'd be better doing this in my dorm room." Harry said, glancing round. "There's a few too many people around for this discussion."

After retreating back to his bedchamber, Harry conjured chairs for everyone, and sat down. "Right, quick overview; Occlumency is an art of defending the mind from external penetration. Another benefit is that it allows the user to more accurately operate their mind, giving them increased attention span, improved memory retention, and faster thought processes."

"Why isn't it taught, then?" Hermione asked. "If it's so useful, why not teach it to everyone?"

"Occlumency is one of a pair of Mind Magic disciplines." Harry explained. "They're classified as 'restricted', because of the potential for abuse. Occlumency is the defence, while Legilimency is the attack."

"If it's restricted, should we be learning it?" Susan asked. "I mean... my Aunt's in the DMLE..."

"Learning Occlumency is not restricted, as such. It's frowned upon, because Legilimency is needed to test the shields. A skilled Legilimens can glean surface thoughts, just by looking into your eyes. Snape does this every time he can. One of the reasons he hates me with a fiery passion is that he can't scan me, since I'm already a reasonably proficient Occlumens."

"So, learning Occlumency is okay, but learning Legilimency is restricted?" Susan clarified.

"Yep." Harry wondered whether or not to reveal the next part. "Personally, and don't quote me on this, I think one of the reasons that Occlumency is not taught is because Dumbledore likes being able to scan students. I could be wrong, but it would make sense."

"Dumbledore probes students' minds?" Neville asked. "That's just wrong!"

"He doesn't do it often." Harry defended weakly. He could see Hermione gearing herself up for a rant. "But, that's beside the point. Teaching Occlumency is fine."

Harry drew his wand, and placed it on his bedside table. "There are two ways of teaching Occlumency. There's the 'vaccination' way, and the long, hard way. I'll explain both. The long hard way involves meditation to sort through your mind, moving your memories into files, which you then lock behind shields. This process can take quite a while, but the results are definitely worth it.

"The other way, what I call the 'vaccination' way is quicker, brutal, and remarkably inefficient. The teacher repeatedly attacks the mind, so that the body can build a natural defence against intrusions. However, during the process, the teacher is effectively mind-raping the student."

"Let's not do that." Padma said quietly.

"Of course not." Harry confirmed. Even though that's what Snape tried to do to me last time... "Now, once you've sorted your mind, and started to construct your shields, you can go a step further, and develop a mindscape. I've managed to do this. That's what I want to show you all tonight. Now, I can't do the Legilimens spell. I simply don't have the knack for it. So, I need you guys to perform Legilimens on me. Once you do, you'll be brought into my mind. I can then hold you there while I show you what you need to see."

Hermione, predictably, was the first to react. "Isn't that illegal?"

"No." Harry shook his head, grinning. "Teaching you how to be Legilimens is illegal. You using the spell to gain access to my mind in this way is permitted."

They group nodded. Luna cleared her throat quietly. "How do we do this?"

"Well, doing it one at a time would be very dull." Harry replied. "So, if you all place the tip of your wands on my forehead, and cast the spell together, hopefully, all seven of us should be inside my mindscape. Then I can show you around."

Susan began to cackle suddenly, rubbing her hands together. "Oh, this'll be fun!"

“Eh?” Harry asked.

“Harry, do you have any idea how many girls want the chance to get into your... mind?”

Groaning slightly, he grimaced at her. “Getting into my mind is one thing... it’s the ones who want to get into my pants that are distressing. I’ve had people come up to me in the street offering me a blowjob... I mean, it’s just not right. I’m twelve, and they... weren’t.”

Hermione gazed at him imperiously. “We’ll talk about this later, Harry.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Harry replied meekly, before letting his backbone reassert itself. “Anyway, put your wands to my forehead, and let’s get this show on the road.”

Six pieces of wood pressed against his head, as six teens chanted “Legilimens!”

Hermione opened her eyes, and let out an ‘eep’ of panic. Never blessed with a love of heights, finding herself apparently floating in space was enough to induce a mild panic attack. After getting herself under control, she looked around the void, seeing the others floating close by.

“Well, this is... different.” Padma said, looking round. “Where are we?”

“You’re in my mind.” A voice came from the darkness.

“Harry?” Hermione called out. “Where are you?”

“I’m right in front of you...”

“Where?” Blaise asked. “I can’t see anything.”

“That’s the point.” Harry’s amused voice called out. “How can you attack something if you can’t see it? The invisibility cloak is the first layer of defence.”

“Well... can you remove it?” Hermione shouted.

In front of them, a massive saucer-shaped object appeared. It was far larger than them, at least fifty metres across, and almost twenty metres high.

“You may notice the green shimmer surrounding the ship, yeah?”

“Yeah...” All six of them murmured.

“Those are the primary shields. They can withstand a concentrated attack from the Legilimens. I’m going to lower them so you can get closer.” The shimmer surrounding the object flickered and vanished. The ship, as Harry called it, manoeuvred closer, and turned. “There should be a door opening to the side. Come on it, but don’t try to go any further.”

“How do we move?” Blaise asked.

Luna shot by, floating gracefully through the void. “This is fun!” She yelled gleefully, grinning like a lunatic. She landed neatly on the edge of the door frame, before stepping forward. “This is cool, Harry.”

“Remember, this is a mindscape. I make the rules here. Just picture yourselves moving forward.”

With sheepish looks, the other five smoothly sailed through space, landing on the deck. Behind them, the door that had opened slid shut. In front of them, another door opened. “Come on in. If you’ll go down the corridor until you get to the third door on the left, I’ll let you into the Pre-Frontal Cortex.”

Moving cautiously down the corridor, they quickly approached the door. It opened, revealing a bright, spacious room. In the centre was a chair, with some kind of desk. All around the room were sleek consoles, lit up with information. What was truly amazing was that there was a person sitting at each console.

One figure, wearing a dark red bodysuit, approached them, wielding a long knife. "Identify!"

"Harry? What's going on?"

The figure sitting on the chair in the centre of the room turned round, smiling when he saw his friends. "Each of these figures represents a personality aspect." He gestured to the red-suited figure. "Tactical. A personification of my aggression and combat abilities." He pointed to a figure in green. "Medical. An anthropomorphic manifestation of my immune system and health." Another figure, wearing white. "Altruism." A figure in hot pink, which made the main-Harry wrinkle his nose. "The Counsellor. My emotions, made manifest. Suffice to say, he stays locked up, most of the time."

Hermione made her way over to him, running her hands through his messy hair. "Oh, you look good in pink, Harry."

Main-Harry just rolled his eyes. "There's a few others lurking about. I think paranoia's hiding in the bar. I know angst was crying in his quarters. Conscience was loitering in the core room a bit ago."

"This is really weird, Harry." Padma said, looking over the Medical console. "I mean... it's so detailed."

"I know. I don't normally see it this way, but it's a good way of making decisions if you allow your personality aspects to chew it over."

"So, you're entire mind's set up like this?" Hermione asked, still stroking her hands through the Counsellor's hair. He was purring at the attention.

"Pretty much. Come on, I'll show you guys to the computer room. That's where my memories are stored."

They followed the black-clad figure, who they found out was the gestalt being, into a room with a large monitor, and seven chairs.

"This is where my memories are stored. Obviously, unimportant stuff, like sitting in history of magic, are stored at the top, whereas more

important things are kept lower down. They can be accessed pretty easily, if you know the passwords.”

He led them on to another room. Inside this was a massive glowing blue column of energy. “The core room. This shows my magical core.” He pointed to a thick beam of energy, a tiny fraction of the main column. “That stream of magic is what maintains the shields outside. Each time I cast a spell, energy gets diverted from the core.”

“What’s the point of all this, though?” Blaise asked. “Yeah, it looks pretty, but what does it do?”

“Control, Blaise.” Harry replied. “I can access any memory I choose. I have near-perfect recall thanks to this. By setting up my mindscape, and performing several different exercises, I’m able to increase my connection to my magic, meaning that I can cast spells easier, and also more efficiently. Plus, my secrets are safe and secure.”

“But... who’s gonna try and access your secrets, Harry?” Hermione asked. “It’s not like there’s loads of enemies about?”

“Oh, but there are.” Harry replied. “Snape has tried over a hundred times to gain access to my mind. Each time, he’s been defeated. Dumbledore tries every so often, but he gets repelled. When Quirrell was possessed last year by Voldemort, he tried to gain entry. This is one of the reasons I do so well in class. I can read a book with almost perfect recall. I can work on magical control. This is what I want to teach you. You won’t all suddenly develop into a super-powered version of yourselves, but you’ll gain control over you magic, possibly even equal to Dumbledore.”

“That’s not possible.” Hermione stated. “Dumbledore’s the greatest wizard in the world.”

Harry looked torn between ripping into the old bastard, and acknowledging his accomplishments. “All right... let me put it another way. Who is more powerful, magically speaking; Dumbledore, or Voldemort?”

“Dumbledore.” Susan replied quickly. “He’s the only wizard You-Know-Who was afraid of.”

“Do you all agree?”

The group nodded slowly, except for Hermione, who looked pensive.

“Well, Voldemort has way more raw power than Dumbledore. I mean, a lot more. Possibly as much as a third.”

“Then... why was You-Know-Who afraid of Dumbledore?” Susan asked.

“Dumbledore has far greater control than Voldemort. Yeah, old Snake Face can throw a lot of powerful curses, and his shields are top notch, but that’s about all he does. Dumbledore uses his skills to make up the difference.”

Hermione nodded. “So... Dumbledore can’t match Voldemort for power, but using tricks and skill, can draw him to a standstill.”

“In a word, yes. Now, picture a wizard with Voldemort’s power and Dumbledore’s control and knowledge, and you’ve got a pretty scary opponent. With training, I think all of you could be a match to Dumbledore.”

Harry smiled. “Now... do any of you know how to get out?”

The group shook their heads. “In that case... Leave!” He shouted, banishing them backwards.

Hermione opened her eyes, noting that she was lying on the floor in Harry’s dorm room. Around her, her other six friends were beginning to stir.

Luna began giggling. “That was fun!”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Only you would think swimming through my mind could be ‘fun’, Luna.” He turned to Hermione. “Are you okay?”

"I'm fine." Hermione replied after a moment, then she grinned at him. "I know what I'm getting you for Christmas, though... one of those hot-pink suits. You looked so cute!"

Rolling his eyes again, Harry snorted at her. "I'll never wear it." He returned his attention to the group as a whole. "Now, I've got some literature for you to read, so you can learn how to start the process. For the moment, don't look Snape or Dumbledore in the eyes. They can pluck surface thoughts from your mind."

He passed out the duplicated books, and was about to send them back to their common rooms, when Susan spoke up. "Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you... do you think you could teach us to fight?"

He looked at her imperiously. "Why, Susan?"

She blushed, but looked up at him. "Well... I'm, uh... I'm starting to receive some... unwanted attention, from some of the older students."

Harry looked at her blankly. 113 years old or not, he still could not understand the vagaries of a 12-year old girl's mind.

"She means," Luna said, smiling dreamily, "that now she is developing breasts, she's being stared at by people."

Ah, Luna... once again, you say things as they really are. Harry thought, staring at Susan's face, while Neville and Blaise's eyes dropped for a fraction of a second. "I'm not exactly an expert at hand-to-hand combat, Sue. I just know a few moves that can make a difference."

"Can you teach us?" Hermione and Padma asked. Being intelligent young women, they knew that the possibility of encountering a gentleman with less than honourable intentions was always a possibility.

Sighing, Harry nodded. "Yeah... I'll need to set something up, but I can teach you what little I know."

As he lay down to bed that evening, he pondered what he had begun.

I've been trying to keep the timeline mostly intact... and here I am, bugging it up completely. I still have to deal with Dobby, Lockhart's crap teaching, being exposed as a Parselmouth, having the school shun me, the attacks on Muggleborns by Blink... Hagrid's removal, Fudge's incompetence, Malfoy... and this doesn't even cover doing my school work.

I am so fucked, it's untrue...

With that comforting thought in mind, Harry fell into a troubled sleep.

– CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX –

Laying Down the Law

Harry woke up the following morning, a crick in his neck and a knot of tension in his stomach. Retreating into his mindscape, he quickly located the source of his doubts and worries. Bloody useless git... He groused. On the bridge of his mental ship, Harry's tactical side pummelled 'The Counsellor' into unconsciousness, releasing the pit of tension. What better way to get rid of angst and misery than some good old fashioned violence? He smirked to himself. Hermione always used to say that I should get in touch with my emotions. Wonder if she meant I should hold it down while punching seven shades of shite out of it?

He sat up from bed, stretching. "God, I love Occlumency..." He muttered, clambering to his feet. "Right... whiz, toothy-pegs and shower."

Harry completed his ablutions, scoffing at the dreadful mess his hair was, before dressing and heading into the common room.

Hermione, Padma and Luna were waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. Harry paused for a moment. "Good Lord..." He muttered. "A vision of beauty, poise and grace."

All three girls blushed prettily, before Hermione stepped forward, giving Harry a tight hug. "You shouldn't keep saying things like that." She said breathily. "We'll all be spoiled."

"Er, actually, I was pointing at the mirror." The girls all looked around to see a blank wall, and a smirking Harry. "I can't help saying things like that when I see you, Hermione. Your beauty inspires me." And makes me hornier than a dog at a 'Miss Lovely Legs' competition. Mmm...

"Yeah, right." Hermione mumbled into his neck. She squeaked as Harry pinched her hip lightly.

“Say that again, Hermione, and I’ll be most upset.” He pulled back slightly, resting his forehead on hers. “You’re the most perfect female in the history of ever, Hermione. Please stop putting yourself down.”

She sighed. “I’ll try, Harry.”

“If you don’t stop, I’ll give you a jolly good tickling.” Harry joked, smirking at her. The gleam in Hermione’s eye scared him... “Anyway...” He turned to Padma and Luna. “Ladies, you’re looking particularly eye-catching this morning. Shall we go and partake of the delicious array of Hogwarts breakfast foods?”

The foursome left the common room, heading down the stairs. “So,” Luna broke the silence, “what breakfast entertainment can we expect this morning, Harry?”

He turned to her, plastering an innocent expression on his face. “I, Luna? You think I’m planning some kind of entertainment? I’m shocked... shocked and appalled. What makes you think I’m planning anything?”

“We know you.” The three girls chorused in unison.

Harry glanced around, nodding to Neville who was coming from the stairs. “Don’t you think it’s curious that Dumbledore wasn’t at lunch or dinner yesterday? I’d be willing to be my entire family fortune that he’s still suffering from the Box’s ‘snitch’ system.”

“‘Snitch system’?” Neville asked. “Morning, Harry. Morning, ladies.”

“Hey, Neville.” The four chorused. Harry carried on. “Yeah, the ‘snitch’ system. Basically, it... highlights someone attempting to break in. If I’m right, and the joy of being me is that I’m always right, it’ll be fairly obvious.”

Not wanting to contradict Harry’s rather egotistical statement, since so far, he had always been right, the group carried on in silence. Susan joined them as they carried on, meeting Blaise on his way up from the dungeons.

"Harry, Neville. Good morning, beautiful woman who set my loins on fire." Blaise maintained his deadpan air, looking over everyone.

Harry let out a 'hmpf'. "No-one ever tells me how I set their loins on fire." He mock-pouted, folding his arms across his chest. "I feel so ugly!"

Hermione grabbed the back of his head and pressed a chaste kiss on his lips, before standing up on her tiptoes to whisper something into his ear. Harry's eyebrow shot up. "I'll... er... I'll keep that in mind." He cleared his throat as he saw the other five fanning themselves. "Right... breakfast."

Once sitting down and eating, Harry kept an eagle-eye on the door. He was waiting for Dumbledore to come in and ask for the counter-curse to the Box's defence.

"So, what do we have today?" Harry asked while watching. "Herbology, isn't it?"

Susan nodded. "Yeah. Professor Sprout popped into the common room last night to let us know. We're gonna be in greenhouse three. Apparently, we're doing mandrakes today."

Harry groaned. "Noisy little buggers. It's like being near the kiddy section in a pub. I hope we're not repotting them. They always fight back." He took a swig of his tea, as if it would somehow provide a potent shield against baby mandrakes. "And they're ugly little bastards. I bet it's what the Malfoy nursery looked like a few years ago."

A loud snigger drew everyone's attention to the door, before two Muggleborn students screamed. "It's a Terminator! It's here to kill us all!"

Albus Dumbledore was stood in the doorway to the Great Hall, eagerly scanning the occupants. When he saw Harry and his friends sitting calmly enjoying breakfast, he sagged slightly in relief. What made this pose more interesting was the fact that Dumbledore appeared to be comprised entirely of a silvery liquid metal, clad in

bright purple robes. He ambled forwards, calmly ignoring the sniggering, pointing and jeering.

“Mr. Potter.” He said coolly. “Could I speak to you for a moment?”

Harry looked up. “Ah, Headmaster. You’re looking shiny this morning. Would you care to join us for breakfast? Perhaps some nice WD40, keep the old joints lubricated.” Harry was having trouble keeping a straight face, as the Weasley twins had conjured magnets and were trying to stick them to the Headmaster.

“Mr. Potter, I would appreciate it if you would remove this silly prank spell from me.” Dumbledore struggled to maintain his dignity. “Casting such spells on the Headmaster carries a hefty punishment.”

Only if I’m caught, and I’m far too much a Marauder for that. “I haven’t cast any spells on you, Headmaster.” Harry replied politely. “I did, however, ward a propriety, registered personal object with a non-harmful ward. The fact that you were attempting to gain access to my personal property is the reason you’re now shiny silver.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Mr. Potter, I explained to you yesterday morning that I would need to inspect and confiscate anything that was capable of breaching Hogwarts’ wards.”

“And I explained to you that I didn’t breach the wards.” Harry replied, still remaining polite. “However, you seem to be glossing over your attempted break-in of my personal property. I would rather discuss that. Did you know that, in the muggle world, breaking and entering can get you arrested and jailed? Count yourself lucky that nobody’s tried to scrap you. Anyway, please, explain your breaking and entering.”

“I explained, Mr. Potter.” Dumbledore snapped. “Now, reverse this spell immediately.”

Harry’s wand flashed once, not speaking the incantation. “By your command, Centurion.” Hermione, as a Muggleborn, cracked up at this, as he did resemble a Cylon in a dress. “I would strongly recommend not attempting that again, however. You’ve had the first

warning. They get a little nastier from here on in.” Including an impotence curse; how good are you at playing snooker with a rope? In the other timeline, he’d found out that Dumbledore had dosed himself with a love-potion, specifically lusting after Pomona Sprout, who was nursing a massive (to match her own body size) crush on Dumbledore. The idea of massive meeting ancient in a sweaty... Urk. I feel ill.

Dumbledore glanced down at his now-flesh coloured skin. “Mr. Potter, this changes nothing. I will still need to confiscate your device. If necessary, I will contact the Aurors and the Department of Mysteries in order to break whatever enchantments are on the object. It would be easier all around if you were to simply surrender it to me now.”

“No.” Harry replied, sitting up straighter. “Hogwarts’ School Rule 316; ‘personal property that is registered cannot be confiscated without just cause of a clear and present danger to the school or it’s occupants’.” And like Stone Cold said, Harry 3:16 says if you try anything, I’ll kick your arse. Sometimes, Harry found himself remembering the most obscure and useless information he possessed, but when it came to it, he’d rather know too much than not enough. “Now, I know you think you can use that rule against me, but since there is no danger to the students, you lose. Remember our agreement from the summer, Headmaster. I wasn’t joking then, and I’m not joking now.”

“This is not over, Mr. Potter.” Dumbledore said as he stalked away.

“I’m not going to rue the day?” Harry looked at his friends, who looked more shell-shocked than anything else. “Seriously, would it take too much for someone to point a wand at me and tell me ‘You shall rue this day, Potter!’?”

“Harry?” Hermione asked. She’d been a little intimidated by the conversation between two clearly powerful and implacable men.

Harry sighed heavily. “He doesn’t like the fact that the Box... we really need to come up with a better name for it, can come and go from the school. He likes knowing who goes where and when, and why, and the Box stops that.” He shrugged. “I think it’s the why that bothers him

the most; if he can't see how something can benefit him, he just doesn't want to give an inch."

"Are you in the wrong?" Susan asked, prompting an angry glare from Hermione.

"No." Harry sighed again. "There's a very simple reason why I can just pop through the wards like they're not there, but it's not something I'm particularly eager to reveal."

"More secrets, Harry?" Luna asked, smiling dreamily at him. "You should share some of your burdens. Keeping everything inside is not good for you."

"Some things have to be kept secret, Luna." Harry replied. "Others, like this, just don't matter." He looked at his friends. "It's not a matter of trust. Really, it's not. It's just... not relevant." He drained his tea. "Come on. Let's go and beat the shit out of the mandrakes."

As the six approached the Greenhouses, Luna peeling away to attend a Potions class, they saw Lockhart stalking away, grinning smarmily. You could see him dripping gittism from his pores.

"That man scares me..." Harry muttered, making sure to not look at him.

"Morning." Sprout grunted as they got closer, clearly in a bad mood. Not surprising, considering Lockhart was about. "We're in Greenhouse 3 today." She stomped off, not waiting for her class to follow, looking like the love child of Mother Earth and Beelzebub.

Once inside the greenhouse, wearing the horrible brown projective jackets, Sprout threw earmuffs at everyone. Before Lockhart had annoyed her, she probably would have thrown them to people, but the man just had that effect.

"Today we're going to be repotting mandrakes." She spat testily. "Who can tell me about Mandrakes?" Predictably, Hermione's hand shot up. "Miss Granger?"

“The Mandrake, or Mandragora is a member of the Nightshade family and can be used as a powerful restorative, Professor. However, its cry is fatal to anyone who hears it.”

“Five points to Ravenclaw, Miss Granger.” Sprout nodded, calming herself now she was back in her own domain. “Now, our mandrakes are still babies, so they won’t kill you, but if you don’t cover your ears, you’ll have a nasty headache when you regain consciousness tomorrow. So, make sure you cover them.”

There was a bit of a mad dash as the other five tried to get round Neville’s tray. They knew he was the expert in Herbology. Unfortunately, Harry and Hermione were furthest away, and hadn’t resorted to elbowing people out of the way yet, though they made no promises for OWL year, and had to sit at another four-person table. Two students approached them gingerly.

“Er... hi.” One said. “I’m Dean Thomas.”

Harry extended a hand. “Heard of you, Dean. Apparently, you’re really good at art.”

Dean nodded slowly. “Yeah... Er... how do you know?”

“I know everything.” Harry replied, shaking hands, before turning to the other newcomer. “You’re Justin Finch-Fletchley, yeah?”

The snooty Hufflepuff nodded. “Yes, yes I am. Heard all about your defeat of You-Know-Who, Potter. Good work.”

Hermione covered a snorting laugh by coughing. Harry, using superhuman effort, managed to avoid rolling his eyes. “Thanks, Justin. I, uh... I appreciate your support.”

“No problem.” Justin replied, completely missing the sarcasm. “You’re Muggle-raised, aren’t you? Was down for Eton myself, but the chance to grace Hogwarts with my presence... well, I couldn’t resist, really, and it wouldn’t have been fair to the others, really.”

Oh dear god... He's like a mini-Lockhart. Harry mused while putting his earmuffs on, clearly ignoring Justin. It's a shame he gets petrified. Well... a little shame, anyway. Peaceful for the rest of us, though.

After the grand and glorious battle against the Mandrakes (I wonder if Lockhart would write a book about that? Harry mused) with minimal casualties all around, the group trooped back into the school, intent on showering the mulch and compost off themselves.

"Free afternoon!" Neville cackled to himself as the group assembled in the Great Hall. "Sweet Merlin, I love free afternoons."

"Do y'all fancy some flying practice this afternoon?" Harry asked, wolfing down a plate of sandwiches. Politely, of course.

Hermione nodded absently, as she stared up at the Head Table. "Harry, Dumbledore's staring at you. I don't think he's gonna let this rest."

Harry looked up at the staff table, seeing Dumbledore glare daggers at Harry. Not certain why, Harry turned round, spotting several Gryffindors staring at the same time. "Good god, I feel popular." He muttered. "Fine, let's get this sorted out."

He wiped his mouth on a napkin, casually tossing it onto his plate. He stood up, stalking towards the Head Table. Dumbledore spotted him coming, and somehow managed to extend his frown and disapproving air. Ignoring the old man, Harry turned to Flitwick. "Professor, as my Head of House, would you be willing to perform an inspection on a piece of personal property that is currently irritating the Headmaster?" He turned to McGonagall. "As the Deputy Headmistress, would you supervise? Frankly, I'm getting sick of him glaring at me." He lowered his voice. "It's making me feel uncomfortable. It looks pretty inappropriate, a Headmaster staring unblinkingly at a good-looking second year."

Dumbledore cleared his throat, ignoring McGonagall's quiet giggle that she was covering with her hand. "I can perform any inspections that are necessary, Mr. Potter." He informed him patronisingly. "And I will also be able to issue a receipt for the confiscation of the object."

Harry turned to him. "You will not be confiscating it, sir. Professors McGonagall and Flitwick will be able to confirm what I've said, after they've completed the inspection. Now, please... leave it alone. I'm sick of fighting with you, and I've only been back at school two bloody days."

McGonagall cleared her throat and stood up. "I'll be pleased to escort you, Mr. Potter. Please let me know when you are available."

"Now, Professor." Harry replied. "I, and most of my friends, have a free afternoon." He turned to Dumbledore. "And then, Professor, you and I shall have a little chat, which will clear the air." His voice turned cold. "Otherwise, me and you will have... issues."

"I look forward to it, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore said magnanimously, before turning to Minerva. "Please deliver the object to my office upon the completion of your inspection." He stood. "Good day."

Harry led the two Professors and his friends, bar Luna, to the Ravenclaw common room, before heading up to his dorm room.

Flitwick stepped closer to the box, drawing his wand and casting several diagnostic spells. "Curious... powerful defences, but non-fatal." He looked up. "Differential triggered wards? Impressive spell-work, Mr. Potter."

"Thank you, sir." Harry replied dutifully. "I must ask you not to physically touch it, though. The defences will kick in unless you're keyed in."

Flitwick nodded. "Understood. And nicely done, by the way." He stepped back.

Harry placed his hand on a section of the door, waiting for a moment until the magi-lock recognised his magical signature and palm print, before opening. Harry pushed open the door, and stepped back. "After you."

The group ambled inside, extremely impressed with the console room. Flitwick looked down at the grating on the floor. "Oh, that's fabulous work!" He moaned in pleasure. "You've managed to subvert the natural floor of the device. That's Mastery-level charms work."

McGonagall looked around, pulling out her wand and casting her own diagnostics. "Transfigured and conjured metals. Permanent conjuration?" She looked at Harry. "That's beyond NEWT-level, Mr. Potter."

Harry just nodded.

Flitwick, while McGonagall had been looking at the metalwork, had wondered over to the central console, where the reactor was pulsing with wild, barely-restrained magic. Not barely restrained as in 'this could be a bit dangerous', but more of a 'yippee, nothing can stop me now!' feel. He didn't know what it did, but he knew that messing around with anything in here could be fatal. And embarrassing.

Flitwick lowered his wand. "While this certainly looks very impressive, Mr. Potter, I must ask... what exactly does it do? Why is the Headmaster so eager to confiscate this device?"

Harry clicked his fingers, closing the doors with a loud clang. "This device, Professor, is an extremely sophisticated Portkey device. But it's so much more. In the right hands, its tactical value is immeasurable. Also, it's a home away from home."

"A self-contained Portkey." Flitwick repeated. "And it passes right through Hogwarts wards. I can understand the Headmaster's concerns, Mr. Potter."

"The Box isn't the problem with that, Professor." Harry sighed, slumping into one of the chairs next to the console. "The problem is magical signatures. Any Portkey that I choose to make will pass through Hogwarts wards like they weren't there. The Box is irrelevant to that."

McGonagall frowned. "The only way that could happen is..." Her eyes widened in realisation. "Are you..."

Harry nodded. "I am the Heir of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. As such, Hogwarts herself allows me to come and go as needed."

Flitwick dropped his wand, while McGonagall stepped backwards. "Good lord..."

Harry's friends, sans Hermione, were equally stunned. Blaise stepped forward. "What does this mean, Harry?"

Shrugging, Harry made a face. "It means that I can come and go from the school as needed. That's it. No secret vaults, no secret powers, nothing like that. It just means that my ancestors were partly responsible for creating the school."

Susan cleared her throat. "Is this one of the secrets that needed to be kept, or one that didn't matter?"

"Doesn't matter." Harry replied. "It's irrelevant, really. I think Dumbledore already knows about the Potters being descended from Gryffindor. Not many people know that Godric and Rowena were married, since she kept her maiden name. Personally, I reckon Dumbledore's still trying to exercise control over me, prevent me having unrestricted access to the school, or, even worse, from coming and going without him knowing, and being able to allow or forbid. Why? I don't know, or really care. But it's gonna stop." He stood up, leading the group through a door at the back of the console room.

"Quarters, a dining room, a training room and gym, and a bathroom." He pointed out each room. "Like I said, it's like a home away from home. And it's utterly harmless." Unless someone's been in the bathroom and not hit the freshening charm. He cast his mind back to the previous timeline, remembering Hermione's love of curry, and Harry's love of the bubblehead charm the next morning.

He led them all back to the console room. "Now, I want to speak to Dumbledore. He's really getting on my pecs with his behaviour, and I want it to stop." He turned back to the Professors. "Would you please escort me so I don't explode him?"

McGonagall raised an eyebrow. "Don't you mean, 'explode at him'?"

Harry shrugged again. "If that's what you wanna think, Professor, don't let me stop you, but I'd prepare to cast Scourgify, just in case." He began jabbing buttons on the console. "Why don't you let me show you what my baby can do, hmm?" He grabbed a large brass lever, sliding it down with a manic grin. With a loud thump, the blue fingers at the centre of the console began to move.

Dumbledore was sitting in his office, sucking on a comforting lemon drop while he pondered the situation involving Harry Potter. Although he'd agreed to back off on certain issues, Potter's introduction of a device that could breeze through the school's formidable defences changed the game, and allowing the boy free-reign to come and go, without him knowing where, bothered him. I cannot allow the 'Boy-Who-Lived' to learn anything that could lead to him going Dark. The fact that this involved most of the potent offensive magicks didn't cross his mind, virtually hamstringing Harry in the fight against Voldemort.

A wind began to blow throughout his office, blowing pieces of parchment from his desk everywhere. A wheezing/groaning sound with no clearly definable source filled the air, before the strange object from the sorting began to materialise in his office. The light on top of the box blinked on and off, casting his office in a strange glow.

After almost ten seconds, the grinding sound stopped, the box fully solidified. Ah.Dumbledore thought to himself. Minerva has delivered the object to me. Excellent. I shall investigate. It may come in useful when Voldemort returns; a portable command centre that would allow me to face the Death Eaters, bringing them back to the Light. He stood up, grabbing his hat as he stepped to the doors. He was about to reach out and touch it, when he remembered the effect from last time.

The doors in front of his opened, revealing an impossibly large room, with eight people stood around an odd table of some type.

"Come in, Headmaster." Harry called out in a no-nonsense tone.

Dumbledore tentatively placed a foot inside, waiting to see if he was attacked or vaporised. He stepped inside, scooting forward when the doors began to close behind him. "I'm glad to see that you have agreed to surrender this device to me, Harry."

"I haven't." Harry replied, jabbing a few other buttons. The gyroscope began to rev up as the dematerialisation sequence began.

Once in flight, Harry sat down. "Now, Headmaster. I've explained to these people how this device is able to pass through Hogwarts wards, and they are satisfied. Will you accept their assurance, or do you require me to explain it to you as well?"

Dumbledore subtly checked his wand was available if it became necessary to subdue Harry. It never occurred to him that he was trapped inside a technological device he could never hope to operate. "If you would explain, Harry."

Harry jabbed a few buttons, watching the console accept the commands. "Tell me about my history, Professor. The history of the Potters. Where are we descended from?"

"Originally?" Dumbledore asked, looking confused by the request. "The first Potters came from Godric's Hollow in Wales. The first recorded Potter was in 1013. His family name came from his occupation. They were clay-workers, using magic to create some of the most exquisite artworks."

"Why is Godric's Hollow so named?" Harry asked, keeping his eye on the console.

"It is the birthplace of Godric Gryffindor, Harry." Dumbledore replied, annoyed. "This information is available in *Hogwarts: A History*. I don't see how it's relevant to our conversation."

"The Potters weren't exactly contemporaries of the Founders, Headmaster, because they were descended from the Founders. Godric's son Amaraine became the first Potter. As such, I am a descendant of Gryffindor."

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I... I suspected that the Potters were linked to the Founders."

"And that is why I can Portkey through the wards. Anyone with a Founders' blood can seek sanctuary at Hogwarts. This device," he gestured to the bulkheads around him, "uses my blood and magic to pass through the wards. Because it uses my blood and my magic, it can only be used by me."

"It is still capable of penetrating Hogwarts' defences, Harry." Dumbledore replied, his hand inching towards his wand. "As such, it must be confiscated so that I can study it."

Harry picked up a piece of wire off the console, and tapped it with his wand; the wire glowed blue for a moment. "This is now a portkey that will breach Hogwarts' defences. Here, study this." Harry tossed the wire to Dumbledore, who caught it, and then dropped it on the floor.

"A piece of wire will not breach the school's defences. No, this box, Harry, must be given to me. I shall study it and determine its use. If it can be used as a command post, then I shall use it thusly. I cannot allow this device to remain in the hands of a student."

"Okay, Headmaster."

"You agree?"

"Certainly." Harry nodded, and stepped away from the console. "By all means, take command. Bring us back to your office, and, when we get there, I shall surrender the box's command codes to yourself."

Dumbledore rushed towards the console, a victorious smile plastered on his face, which collapsed and crumbled on the floor when he saw a massive amount of dials, switches and levers in front of him. He pointed his wand at Harry, and gestured him to the console. "You shall pilot this device, Harry. It will be a part of Hogwarts' resources, and you shall pilot it where and when I deem necessary for the Greater Good, and teach me how to do the same."

"No, Albus." Flitwick said. "This device is Mr. Potter's personal property, and is not a danger to the school. I will contest any attempt to confiscate it."

"As will I." McGonagall added, glaring at her boss.

"Now, before I take us back to Hogwarts, I want a chat, Headmaster." Harry said firmly, gently pushing Dumbledore backwards. "Frankly, you've been getting on my tits recently, and I've had enough. I've told you many times that I will not stand being manipulated or controlled. Last New Year, you agreed, then by summer, you were right back to your old ways. Over the summer, you tried again. Poppy and Minerva tried to stop you, and scant weeks later, you're doing it yet again."

Dumbledore sighed. "Mr. Potter, there are certain actions I must take to ensure the safety of our world. I realise that these actions may not be to your liking, but they are necessary for our security. You need to learn that not everything will go your way, just because you wish it to." The oblivious old man didn't see Minerva's lips thin so much, they disappeared, nor that she had a firm grip on her wand.

"People who trade freedom for security deserve neither', Headmaster." Harry quoted. "Now, you've been dicking about with me for the last year. It stops now. You've already said that you'd do so, and have broken that word. I want something stronger."

Several eyes flitted to Harry, Dumbledore's included. "What do you mean?"

Harry took a deep breath. This was going to be difficult. "I want an unbreakable vow from you, in front of these witnesses, that you will make no attempt to manipulate me. Ever. That you will answer whatever question I ask with the complete truth, whenever I ask it. If asking the question violates another oath, you will tell me who that oath was made to, and why." He saw Dumbledore's mouth open. "This is non-negotiable, Headmaster, and a one-time only offer. Otherwise, I send us back to Hogwarts, pack my stuff, and leave."

"You ask too much, Harry." Dumbledore said firmly. "You forget; you are just a student. I do not have to answer to you."

“Fine.” Harry shrugged. “I’m setting the co-ordinates back to your office, Headmaster. I’ll drop you off, then pack up my gear.”

“I will not allow you to leave, Mr. Potter. I am acting for the good of everyone. In time, you will come to see the truth.” Dumbledore drew his wand, only to have it blasted out of his hand by Flitwick’s well-aimed ‘Expelliarmus’. “Filius! You need to understand that Harry needs to be under my guidance until I am satisfied he can make the right decision without my supervision.”

“Your control, you mean.”

Harry was ignoring this byplay. “So, Hermione... do you wanna come with me? I can hire tutors to get us educated. We’d be able to take NEWTs as soon as we’re ready.”

Hermione nodded. “I spoke to my parents in the summer. They agreed to do whatever I felt was best.”

Harry turned to his friends. “What about you guys?”

Susan’s jaw flapped for a moment, before she gathered herself. “Auntie Amelia’ll be pissed, but I’m sure once I explain that I’m doing it to escape the Headmaster’s manipulations, she’ll come round.”

“Gran’ll want to kill me.” Neville said, smirking. “Then she’ll come and kill the Headmaster. I’m in.”

Padma hesitated. “I need to speak to my parents before I can say anything, Harry.”

“Wait.” McGonagall said firmly. “This is going too far.” She turned to Harry. “Your oath is a little excessive, Harry, but only in the wording.” She turned to Dumbledore. “Albus, at the risk of being crude, you need to extract your head from your nether orifice. You’re risking losing at least six students, possibly more when you consider the Weasley twins and their friends. When the press finds out you’re hounding students out of the school, including the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’,

other parents will pull their children out, too. If you continue on this path, Hogwarts will be closed down.”

Dumbledore looked offended. “I cannot simply allow a student to dictate terms, Minerva. I have duties and responsibilities that could be compromised if I agree with Mr. Potter’s oath.”

Filius cleared his throat, holding out a piece of parchment. “I have taken that into account, Headmaster. I believe this will be an adequate oath to satisfy both parties.”

Harry took the parchment, and read through it.

Albus Dumbledore will abandon any plans to manipulate or control Harry Potter. Any attempts to influence Harry Potter will also be abandoned, except in the matters of his education. All educational plans must be approved by the Deputy Head Teacher and Harry Potter’s head of house.

Albus Dumbledore will answer any relevant question directed by Harry Potter at the time of asking to the best of his ability. Relevant questions will be only be in the following categories: Harry Potter’s personal history; Harry Potter’s educational requirements and conduct; Harry Potter’s past and possible future dealing with Lord Voldemort.

If Harry Potter asks Albus Dumbledore a question that would contradict another oath, he will explain who that oath is with. If the other oath contradicts the ‘relevant questions’ that Harry Potter is allowed to ask, Albus Dumbledore will explain the exact circumstances of that other oath, and why it must be upheld.

Harry finished reading, then looked up at Dumbledore. “This oath would be acceptable with me, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore read through it, paling when he considered the ramifications of such an oath, but he recognised that it would allow him to retain influence with Harry, and more importantly, would ensure the young man remained at Hogwarts. “Very well.” He sighed dramatically. “I am still dreadfully disappointed at this complete lack

of trust, Mr. Potter. You really need to listen to your elders, Harry, when we look out for your interests; I have only the best of intentions for you.”

No, you don’t. Harry thought, saying nothing aloud. You don’t have best intentions for me. You just wanna make sure that Voldemort gets defeated anyway possible, no matter the cost to me or my friends.

“I will bond your oath, gentlemen.” McGonagall said, pulling out her wand.

Harry held out his hand, waiting for Dumbledore to take it. The old man did, after a few moments of piteous looks, both men dropping to their knees in the ritualistic pose.

“Albus Dumbledore, will you promise to abandon any plans to manipulate or control Harry James Potter?” McGonagall asked.

“I will.” A tendril of white flame erupted from McGonagall’s wand, wrapping itself around the men’s combined hands.

“Will you make no attempts to influence Harry Potter, except in the routine matters of his standard Hogwarts education?”

“I will.” A second tendril came from the wand, interlinking itself with the first.

“Will you answer any question that Harry Potter asks, in full, provided it deals with him directly, or any possible future actions with the wizard who calls himself... Lord V-Voldemort?”

“I will.” A third tendril joined the first two, forming a glowing white chain.

“If any question asked by Harry Potter would contradict another oath, will you explain that to him, detailing who the oath was made to, and why.”

Dumbledore hesitated for a moment, before sighing. "I will." A fourth tendril joined with the previous three, before burning white hot for a second, then vanishing.

"So mote it be." McGonagall added, not a part of the ritual, but to let everyone know it had been completed.

Harry pulled back his hand. "Well, job's a good'un." He stood up. "Now, I'm gonna go back to school. Headmaster, I'm sure that we can have a discussion at some point that will be very enlightening."

Dumbledore bowed his head in defeat. "I never wished for this enmity; I only ever wished the best for you, Harry. "

Harry looked down at Dumbledore, deciding to throw the old man a bone. It would be the only one. "I don't hate you, Professor. I don't even dislike you. I dislike interference in my life. I dislike people attempting to manipulate me. Now, I'm a 'no-second-chances' kind of guy. I don't want to break with you. I want to get along with you. You're a good man, sir. Please, don't make me walk away from Hogwarts."

Hermione stepped over, wrapping her arms about his waist, and resting her head on his shoulder. "Sir, from what I've heard about you, you're the greatest wizard in the world. I respect that. But, you seem to have lost sight of the people."

"I agree." Flitwick spoke up. "You've been fighting so long, Albus, that you see the battles, the war, the sacrifices and the goals. You've lost sight of the people involved in those positions. Perhaps you should redirect your attention to where it will be useful."

"I will try." Dumbledore offered as he climbed to his feet, wincing as his knees cracked. "I will try."

After the excitement of the afternoon, dinner seemed almost dull in comparison. Luna joined them, fresh from a riveting afternoon of Potions. Snape had been his usual unpleasant self, but after Harry's actions, the man was pretty much harmless. Rude, obnoxious and stinking, but harmless.

"I miss all the fun." Luna pouted, slumping in her chair.

"Fun?" Neville squeaked. "I about pissed my pants when Harry threatened to leave the school. I thought Dumbledore was about to blast us all."

"He's not evil, Neville." Luna said airily. "He's just... misguided, from what I've heard."

"He's a sneaky old bird." Harry muttered quietly. "I just hope he gets his head out of his arse."

"Anyway..." Hermione drawled, getting everyone's attention. "Any plans for the weekend?"

Harry pulled out his schedule. "Let's see... Friday tomorrow... oh, bugger! Double History of Magic, and Astronomy! On a Friday night! Proof that there is no God."

Hermione ignored her boyfriend. "Flying practice was mentioned earlier. I wouldn't mind doing that. Maybe we could have some speed drills or stuff like that."

"Or, we could go and hack off the Quidditch teams. Five galleons says Ollie has his team out there at the crack of dawn practicing." Harry smirked evilly. "I've not had a chance to wig Ollie out for almost three months." He laughed loudly; from the sound of it, he'd been spending hours working on his evil laugh. "Oh, I love doing that to him..."

"Behave." Hermione commanded. "You shouldn't pick on him. Good lord, after that last Quidditch game, he wouldn't come near you." She reached out and grasped his hand. "His loss... my gain."

Harry turned to her, his eyes in the familiar adorable puppy-dog pout. "Please, Hermione... let's go and annoy Oliver. It'll be fun!"

Unable to resist Harry's sinister yet pleading looks, Hermione folded, sagging neatly into her chair. "Fine. I'll help you annoy Oliver."

Neville smirked. "I'll come along too, if you don't mind. God knows I could use the flying practice."

"I think we all could." Padma admitted, sighing. "It's definitely not my preferred method of magical travel."

"It's better than Floo." Harry spat. "Horrible way, that is. Always end up arse over tit."

Hermione giggled, ignoring Harry's pouting glare. "It's true. He does. It's quite funny."

"Anyway..."

The gang gathered on Saturday morning, yawning and scratching as they grabbed brooms from the school storage shed. Harry kept his in his trunk, not trusting people not to damage it. As he led them to the field, he spotted the Gryffindor Quidditch team staggering out of the locker room.

Harry's face lit up when he saw the Scottish 6th-year. "Hi, Ollie." He purred.

Wood stopped instantly in his tracks when he heard that dreaded voice. Gathering all his Gryffindor courage, he turned to face his tormentor. "Potter."

Harry pouted. "Is that all you have to say to me, Ollie? I'm hurt..."

Fred and George had coached him. He was ready for this. He could do it. He would do it. Oliver strode forward, thrusting out his hand. "No... that's not all. It's very good to see you, Harry. I missed you."

Not missing a beat, Harry grasped Oliver's hand, smirking inwardly when he felt Ollie stroking his knuckles. "Ah, you have missed me, haven't you?" He said in his sexiest voice. "Let me guess, you got your team up, and now you're cracking the whip... I've never wanted to be a Gryffindor so much in my life."

Oliver didn't even blink. "Don't need to be a Gryffindor for me to crack a whip, Harry..."

"Ooh, promises..." Harry and Oliver broke down laughing at the same time, pumping their hands once before dropping them to their sides. "You did well there, Ollie. Didn't let me get you down at all."

"Yes, well... I figured that if I could handle your come-ons, the Slytherins' booing wouldn't affect me at all."

Harry gasped dramatically. "You're just using me?" He sniffed and turned away. "I'm hurt, Ollie, really..."

Ollie patted the top of Harry's head patronisingly. "Yes, I am."

"Good man, Ollie. I'm proud of you. Still, that means I'll have to find another way to distract you during the game. I'll think of something; I'm very good." Harry grinned. "So, you got your entire team out of bed, entirely too early, on a Saturday, and have now filled their heads with plays and tactics." He looked over at the twins, who were leaning against each other, bravely fighting to stay awake.

Wood faced his players. "Yep. All bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, ready for action." He grinned at Harry. "We'll be kicking your arse come game time."

Angelina's head dropped into Fred's lap as she succumbed to sleep. Fred didn't even blink as he raised his trapped hand, resting it on her shoulder.

"Oh, yeah... I can see that."

Hermione stepped closer, protectively wrapping an arm around her boyfriend. "Oliver Wood... are you flirting with my man?"

"Yes, ma'am." He replied politely, nodding his head respectfully to her.

"I can't blame you." Hermione replied, pulling Harry closer. "Harry, try not to tire him out too much."

“Oh, shite...” Oliver muttered, looking over their heads. Harry and Hermione turned together, not breaking contact, to witness the thugs and Neanderthals that made up the Slytherin team, clad in their bright green robes. “What do you want, Flint?”

As Flint opened his mouth to speak, Hermione shuddered. Harry leaned in closer. “I know... he looks like a shark, doesn't he? God... your parents would be having wet dreams over what they could charge to fix that.”

“...New seeker’.” Wood asked, holding open a note. “You’ve got a new seeker? Who is it?”

Blonde-haired arrogance pushed its way through the players at front, revealing a personification of Bad Faith. “Me.”

Malfoy’s eyes were locked on Harry, who responded in atypical fashion; he raised an eyebrow and grunted.

Flint was not happy with everyone’s lack of response to their wonderful news, so he decided to up the ante. “And that’s not all. Look what Draco’s father donated to the team.” Each of the Quidditch players raised a shiny black-handled broomstick, each of them clearly expensive.

“‘Nimbus 2001’.” Hermione read off the handle. “Harry, how much are those?”

Harry closed his eyes as he fought to remember. “Er... about 34,000 pounds. That’s...” quick bit of mental arithmetic... “690 galleons each. And seven of them is about... 4,800 galleons.”

“A quarter of a million pounds to put his son on the Quidditch team... man, you Dad’s got more money than sense, doesn’t he, Malfoy?” Hermione sneered weakly at him. It really wasn’t her best expression.

Malfoy’s face turned puce incredibly quickly. “No-one asked for your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood!”

Oliver, Padma and Susan gasped loudly, shocked at the vile language the scion of a Noble house was using.

Hermione, on the other hand, didn't care what crap Malfoy spouted. "Is that really the best you can come up with, Malfoy? 'Mudblood'? Honestly... I would have thought you could come up with some intelligent insults. See, even a Muggleborn can do it; 'inbred gibbering idiot', or 'arrogant little streak of piss'. Come on, Draco, make it fun for me!"

Clearing his throat, Harry drew the attention back to him. "I don't understand why he bought those brooms, though."

"Harry?" Oliver asked. "What's wrong with them? They're good brooms."

"They're racing brooms, Ollie. In a flat out speed run, they're about the best on the market at the moment. But for Quidditch? Nuh-uh. It's a shame that Ravenclaw will be hanging onto the Quidditch cup this year."

Wood was intrigued. "How do you mean?"

Harry smirked. Even though he hadn't let Malfoy's comment about Hermione's blood-status get to him, Malfoy would still be paying for saying it. And he knew the perfect way, too. "The 2001 is fast and manoeuvrable, and a good 10 percent faster than my 2000, but they pay a price for it; it's stability's pretty poor, and it's about 35 percent less manoeuvrable than the 2000, and 20 percent less than most of the Cleansweeps. Trying to pull off any Quidditch manoeuvres at speed will cause them to-"

Snap! In the Slytherins' hands, each of the seven broomsticks was snapped cleanly in half, rendering a quarter million pounds of Malfoy money into kindling. No-one noticed the imperceptible twitch of Harry's pinkie finger.

"Snap." Harry concluded smoothly. "Oh, dear... see what I mean? These brooms are absolutely no use for Quidditch." At least, not anymore.

"I'll get you for this, Scarhead!" Malfoy squealed, drawing his wand.

"You don't want to do that." Harry said in a tone of ice. "I have done nothing to you, Malfoy, and I have not drawn a wand. Fire a curse at me and you will die. Are we clear?" While he was speaking, everyone except Oliver, who was far too engrossed in watching the Slytherin hopes snap, Hermione, who wasn't afraid of Harry's temper, and Malfoy, who was glaring at Harry in what he thought was a menacing fashion, had stepped back, clearly afraid of a small second year student.

Malfoy thrust his wand back into his pocket, before spinning on his heel and mincing away, followed by the Slytherin team, each of them holding onto the shattered remains on the new brooms.

"What the hell was that?" Oliver asked in a whisper.

Harry shrugged. "They all broke, Ollie. I told you. The 2001 isn't that great a broom for Quidditch."

Hermione leaned in close to him. "Harry... if I was a suspicious person, I'd think that you broke those brooms because Malfoy was rude."

Raising an eyebrow, Harry looked down at his girlfriend. "You always were a smart girl, Hermione. Of course, I would never admit to such a heinous deed."

She smiled at him. "Thank you, Harry."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Harry replied innocently. "The person who did that, whoever I may be, should be thanked, though." He turned back to his friends. "So... shall we fly?"

Two hours later, the group had finished doing their flying practice. Harry was the only one who could be considered 'competent', but the others had potential. Of course, Harry had been flying for over a century, and was used to handling brooms at least twice as fast as his Nimbus, but Hermione, surprisingly, managed to perform some

good manoeuvres. When she got a better broom and some experience, she'd be a hell of a flyer.

Padma stretched out. "I can't believe it's so tiring sitting on a piece of wood. And my arms are killing me." She slumped onto the grass, sitting next to Susan and Blaise, both of whom were too tired to get up the energy to complain. They all watched Harry standing there casually... the bastard hadn't even worked up a sweat!

"You know, it always makes me laugh when someone says that Quidditch builds up rock-hard bodies. Why? I mean, sure, throwing a ball will build up the muscles in one arm, same for the beaters, but a 6-pack? How many times have you seen the Wimbourne Wasps doing ab-crunches on a broom?" Harry looked at the others, who looked knackered, except for Neville, who appeared to be dozing.

"Why don't we pop over to Hagrid's? It's closer than the school, and we can have a sit down?" Hermione suggested diplomatically, while using her toe to subtly nudge Neville awake. She, like the others, was knackered, but didn't want to appear weak to Harry.

"Yeah!" Harry exclaimed cheerily. "Let's go see Hagrid. Double-time?"

Six identical groans reached his ears.

Hagrid was out working on his crops when the youths approached. Since it was early September, Hagrid was busy working on the school's Pumpkin patch, in preparation for the Halloween feast that was a scant two months away.

"'Ello, there!" Hagrid called over, waving his huge arm at the kids. "What brings you lot down here?"

Harry smiled at his first friend. "Just popped down for a visit, Hagrid, if you're not busy?"

Hagrid smiled warmly. "Never too busy for you and your friends, Harry. Come on in. I'll pop the kettle on."

After serving tea and his version of biological weapons... or rock cakes, as he called them, Hagrid settled down. "I've got a bone to pick with you, Harry-"

Snarling, Harry interrupted. "If I hear one word about autographed photos, Hagrid, I'm going to be mightily annoyed."

Hagrid just chuckled. "Yeah, the fop was down here earlier. He offered to sign my copies of his books."

"You don't own them do you, Hagrid?" Blaise asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Nah." Hagrid replied. "With the forest behind me, I've never needed kindling that badly." The youths snickered. "He told me that he'd be happy to sell me a set."

"How'd you manage to avoid that?" Neville asked. "That man seems awfully pushy to get rid of his books. Gran says that they're rubbish. She objected to buying them."

"We all objected to buying them, Nev." Harry replied. "Unfortunately, mandatory reading lists make that one hard to avoid." He turned to Hagrid. "So... how'd you get out of it?"

"I told 'im I couldn't read." Hagrid replied, grinning widely. "His jaw flapped for a minute then he stalked away."

Harry tutted loudly. "Hagrid, that was devious, sneaky and worthy of a Slytherin. Well done."

"Seconded." Blaise added, smirking at Hagrid. "We'll have you in silver and green before you know it."

"Here, now, there's no need to be insulting!" Hagrid protested, grinning at Blaise to remove the sting from his words. "So, what d'you think of the Pumpkins? Coming along nicely, they are. Should be ready for the feast."

Hermione eyed his suspiciously. "They seem awfully big, Hagrid. Bigger than pumpkins should be. Why is that?"

"I, er... I might've helped 'em out a bit." Hagrid admitted shiftily, his eyes automatically flitting to his pink umbrella, dropped untidily in the corner. "Just to get 'em ready."

"I thought you couldn't use magic?" Susan asked, looking suspiciously at Hagrid.

"Er... well, I can, but my wand was snapped. I kept the pieces, though."

Harry could not have asked for a better opening, considering that he knew what was coming in the near future. "Yeah, I meant to ask you about that. When we went shopping in the alley, you told me you were expelled in your third year, but you never actually said why. I was just wondering."

Hagrid's gaze dropped. "Er... it's not something I like talking about, actually." He took a long draught of his tea. "Bad situation it was, bad. Please don't ask me again."

Don't worry, Hagrid... I have a plan. "Okay, Hagrid." He smiled warmly. "So... who do you fancy for this year's Quidditch season? And, more importantly, the Sock Quidditch League?"

Finishing with Hagrid, the seven made their way back to the main doors, intent on a shower and some lunch. At least, that was the plan. As with all plans, it disintegrated before first contact with the enemy. In this case, it was Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy.

"Potter!" Snape roared upon spotting Harry, grabbing his wand. "You'll pay for this!"

Harry maintained his calm. "Professor Snape, lower your wand." He stared impassively at the older man until the wand dropped a fraction of an inch. "What will I pay for, sir?"

“You destroyed seven highly expensive broomsticks! I’ll see you expelled for this!”

Harry yawned widely. “This again? I think you need to investigate a situation before pulling a wand of me. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m hungry.” He made to walk past Snape, only to have his arm grabbed painfully, and shoved against a wall.

“You will not walk away from me, Potter!” Snape snarled, leaning in close to Harry’s face, spittle and rancid breath washing over him. Harry felt himself swooning, and not in a good way. “Mr. Malfoy has stated that you destroyed his father’s donation to the team. I shall be confiscating your broom, and billing you for them.”

Arching an eyebrow, Harry stared at the greasy potions master, almost begging him to try Legilimency. “And you have already made a decision, based on your little shit’s whining? I don’t think so.”

Keeping the painful grip, Snape yanked Harry towards the stairs. “We’ll be going seeing the Headmaster about this, Potter! You’ll be out of here by dinner!”

Yanking his arm free, Harry turned back to his friends. “I’ll catch up with you guys later.” He yelped as Snape grabbed his arm again.

Without another word, Harry pulled his arm free, spinning around and grabbing Snape’s wrist. He tugged down, causing Snape’s arm to straighten out, before Harry launched a single forearm punch. Snape howled in agony as his elbow was destroyed, bending his arm completely the wrong way. His face paled as he dropped to his knees. Harry knelt down next to him.

“You touch me again, Snivellus, and I won’t stop with your arm. You have been warned that if you try anything with me, I will finish it. You assaulted me, I returned the favour.” Harry smirked at the man’s pale face. “You can never beat me, Snivellus. I suggest you save yourself a world of pain and don’t try.”

Snape's howls had summoned a number of people, McGonagall, Flitwick and Dumbledore amongst them. Harry's friends hadn't moved from their spot, enthralled with Harry's move.

"Mr. Potter!" McGonagall near-shrieked. "What is going on here?"

With a sigh, Harry drew his wand, casting a numbing charm on Snape's destroyed elbow. "Perhaps we should discuss this in the Headmaster's office? We were on our way there anyway."

"Very well." Dumbledore sighed heavily. He just knew it was gonna be one of those days.

After heading to the Hospital Wing to get Snape a pain-relieving potion and a cartilage-repair draught, the group of four teachers and two students congregated in the Headmaster's office. Harry sat on one of the hard wooden chairs, Malfoy sitting as far from him as possible.

"Mr. Potter, would you please explain what happened?"

"No." Harry replied. "I believe Snape and Malfoy should go first, sir. They wanted to bring the initial complaint."

Dumbledore nodded, before turning his twinkling blue eyes to the Malfoy scion. "Mr. Malfoy?"

Malfoy puffed up his chest, glad to be able to speak to the top dog. "My father made a donation of brooms to the Slytherin team, sir. When we went out to the pitch to try them out, Potter destroyed them, sir. I want him expelled, and also reparations made."

Nodding slowly, Dumbledore turned to Snape. "Severus?"

The man was still a little pale, but the pain-relieving potion was working well. "Mr. Malfoy came and told me about Potter's actions. I waited for him to return in the Entrance Hall. I was telling him that we were coming to see you, and he attacked me in an unprovoked assault. He should be expelled immediately, and charges filed!"

Dumbledore turned back to Harry. "And your version of events, Mr. Potter?"

Harry smiled, before turning to Snape. "You see, Snivellus? This is how it should go. It's called 'investigation'. You should try it sometime." He turned back to Dumbledore, ignoring the now-puce grease-ball. "I was out by the Quidditch pitch with my friends, and I saw the Gryffindor team. I was chatting with them when the Slytherin team came out, stating that they were going to take over the pitch, because they needed to train a new seeker." He paused for a moment. "If the Gryffindors have booked the pitch, why can Snape just authorise their team to use it whenever they want?"

McGonagall cleared her throat. "They can't. I shall ensure that teams are only allowed on the pitch when it has been booked. Please, continue."

"Anyway, Malfoy came over, bragging about how his Daddy bought the whole team brooms. When Hermione pointed out that Lucy had more money than sense, he called her a Mudblood." While not really relevant to the discussion, it was fun just to drop Malfoy in the shit. "I was talking with Oliver about the brooms, saying that they were... delicate. At that point, the brooms all snapped. It was very strange."

"You snapped them, Potter!" Malfoy shouted. "When my father hears about this-"

Harry's face was hard as stone. "Send him to me, Malfoy. I'll happily deal with his little 'tantrum'." He turned back to Dumbledore. "It really was a dreadful coincidence, sir. Must just have been a bad batch."

"Indeed." Dumbledore replied. "And what happened with Professor Snape?"

"I was coming back from seeing Hagrid, when Snape accosted me in the Entrance Hall. He drew his wand, something that I have warned him about, and he threatened me. He then physically assaulted me, like a Muggle," he shot Snape a pitying look, "then tried to drag me away. I pulled my arm free of his grasp, and told my friends I'd see

them later. He then assaulted me again, which prompted me to retaliate.”

Dumbledore nodded again. Based on what he knew of Malfoy and Severus, it was the more likely explanation. “Can you supply proof of your innocence, Mr. Potter?”

“Can they supply proof of my guilt, Professor?” Harry retorted instantly, then decided to be generous. “Since we’re now working in a spirit of co-operation, Professor, I’ll extend an olive branch. I will submit my memories of both encounters for us all to view in your Pensieve. If you can prove I destroyed their brooms, I’ll pay the 5,000 galleons to replace them. If not, then I want a public apology from Malfoy for the false accusation, and from Snape for assaulting me. And no, I won’t call him ‘Professor.’” He added the last when he saw Dumbledore’s mouth open.

“That seems fair to me, Mr. Potter.” Flitwick said. “The accusations were both public, so the apologies should be, too.”

Dumbledore said nothing, just got his Pensieve out from its cupboard. Without being told, Harry drew his wand, putting it to his temple and pulling out a silvery strand that plopped into the bowl, before pulling out another one. He then offered his wand to Dumbledore. “While they’re loading, why don’t you do a Priori Incantatum on my wand?”

Taking the wand, Dumbledore pressed his to it. An Arithmancy equation, comprised of white smoke, floated up and hovered in the air.

Dumbledore squinted at the smoke for a moment. “The numbing spell.”

A second wand tap, and a new equation appeared.

“Charms class on Wednesday.” Flitwick offered. “First class of second year.”

Another smoky equation floated up. Dumbledore scrutinised it for a moment. "That appears to be a shrinking spell." He looked up at Harry. "Did you reduce your trunk before you came to school?"

"Yes, sir." Harry replied, looking bored with the whole procedure.

Dumbledore tapped Harry's wand, ending the presentation. "I think that is sufficient evidence, Mr. Potter, and I appreciate your candour. If we now watch the memories, we should get this whole matter cleared up."

The group, bar Harry, sank into the Pensieve, their features glazing over while their conscious minds were inside the mythical device. Wiggling his finger, Harry switched Snape's underwear with Malfoy's, and tied his shoelaces together. Simple little pranks, but they would keep him amused for a while. He debated doing the same switch with Dumbledore and McGonagall, but decided against it. He was trying to get Dumbledore to behave, and pranking the man wouldn't do him any favours... except make him laugh.

Five minutes later found Harry engaged in a furious staring contest with Fawkes, winning this one since his eyes were bigger than the bird's. The other five people in the office suddenly began moving.

"Mr. Potter is correct, Mr. Malfoy. There is no evidence of his destroying your team's brooms. It must have been a bad batch. Your apology will be delivered at dinner this evening. Dismissed."

As Malfoy got up to walk out, Dumbledore turned to Snape. "Severus, you attacked a student, more importantly, you attacked the Head of an Ancient and Noble house. Mr. Potter may press charges on you for your assault."

Snape's mouth dropped open at what he was being told. "He attacked a teacher! I want him expelled!"

"You attacked him first, Severus." McGonagall said sharply. "Lord Potter, will you be pressing charges against Professor Snape?"

Harry shook his head. "No, ma'am. Honour has been satisfied... for the moment. However, if Snape attempts to assault me again, it shall be met with appropriate force."

"Understood, Lord Potter." McGonagall said firmly, before turning to Snape. "Your apology will also be made at dinner. You're dismissed, Severus. Please leave."

Snape stood to leave, falling forward as he realised his shoes were tied together. With a roar, he pulled his feet apart, snapping the laces as he stalked away.

McGonagall sighed as she turned to Dumbledore. "Albus, that man is trouble. I suggest keeping a very close eye on him in the future."

"I will." Dumbledore replied quietly, before turning to Harry. "Thank you for not killing him, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "I meant what I said though, sir. If he tries anything, I will retaliate. And I'm willing to bet I can be a damned sight more vicious than he can. I've given enough warnings, and let enough go, that he's now run out of chances. The ice is cracking underneath him. His next misstep and he goes down."

"Is there anything else we need to discuss, Harry?" Dumbledore asked slowly, wondering just how far that repaired bridge would reach.

"I don't think so, sir." Harry replied casually. "Unless there's anything you wish to discuss with me?"

Dumbledore's eyes lit up. "Actually, there was one thing. It's about your box." Flitwick and McGonagall groaned in unison. Dumbledore ignored them. "How does it work?"

Harry smiled. This was a side of the Headmaster he liked. Not the manipulative old man, but the big kid inside, the one who wore silly hats on Christmas, the one who would eat lemon drops all day. "You remember that circular console in the middle?" Dumbledore nodded. "That's a programmable Portkey. Can go anywhere. It's attached to

the box, which means that wherever the console goes, the box goes with it. Makes it very smooth and comfortable.”

“Ah... how did you come up with it?”

“I’ve taken a Portkey, and I wanted to throw up afterwards. It made sense to see if I could find a way to smooth out the ride. So, it’s self-contained. Works for me.”

“Ingenious...” Dumbledore sighed. “It’s nice to see the youth of today working on society’s problems.”

“Yes... May I be dismissed, sir? I’m quite hungry.”

“Hmm?” Dumbledore looked up. “Of course, I’m sorry. Please, go and get some lunch.”

Harry stopped at the door. “Sir? I’m glad that we’re able to work together.” He vanished through the door.

“I’m glad too, Harry.” Dumbledore said, looking up at Minerva. “Go on, then.” He sighed.

“He’s a good young man, Albus.” McGonagall scolded lightly. “Work with him, and I think we’ll all be happier.”

“Aye...”

September had two important meanings for Harry; the first was the return to school, enjoyable because he truly liked Hogwarts, and the second, and more important, was Hermione’s birthday on the 19th.

He’d managed to find her a useful on-the-day present, (since the cat from hell was her main present) and waited until he saw her.

As she came down the stairs, he smiled widely at her. “Good morning, Hermione! My goodness, you look stunning! Happy birthday!”

Hermione blushed prettily, as she did every time Harry complimented her, before she wrapped him in a hug. "Good morning, Harry. Thank you."

He grabbed something from the couch, presenting it to her with a flourish. "Here you are, girlfriend."

"Harry, you shouldn't have." She scolded lightly. "You already got me a present."

"Speaking of which," He glanced around warily, "where is the demon?" He squeaked as something gently pawed the back of his leg, warning him that, next time, claws could be extended. "Oh, morning, Crookshanks."

The cat glared at him, before meowing piteously at Hermione's feet, looking up at her. She leaned down, scooping the animal up and hugging him. Crookshanks gave Harry a superior look as he was cuddled.

"Yeah, eat it up, furball." Harry murmured. "Anyway, here." Hermione put Crookshanks onto the couch, taking the book from Harry. She ripped open the paper, seeing a book.

"'Familiar Magic'?" She looked up at him. "What's it about?"

"Since demon-cat's your familiar, instead of just a pet, you can use him in some spells and rituals. That book shows most of them."

"Ooh..." Hermione was about to sit down and start reading.

"However, how about brekkie first?" Harry asked, spotting the signs of an impending Hermione read-a-thon.

She blushed, rushing up the stairs to her dorm room to drop the book into her library trunk, before dashing back downstairs.

"So... party tonight?" Harry asked, leading her through the portrait hole.

Author's Note:

It's been noted in several reviews that Harry smacking Hermione down about her crush on Lockhart was a bit cruel. I don't see it that way. My missus has a huge crush on Kevin Sorbo (Hercules: The New Adventures, and Andromeda) and I don't care. However, if she were to sit on the couch next to me watching the show, and started drooling and saying how handsome and gorgeous he is, I'd be a bit pissed. So, Harry doesn't care about the crush, he cares about the fact she was fawning over the fop right in front of Harry. As I would.

Frankly, I was getting bored of the Manipulative!Dumbledore, so I've put an end to it here. May resume in the future, may not...

This is more of a set up chapter, plus a chance to have a crack at Malfoy and Snape. Things are now on course for second year to become interesting and dangerous.

– CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN –

The Chamber of Secrets: Re-Opened

The time passed quickly. The lessons with Lockhart were so far beyond worthless, Harry had forgotten what it looked like on the way past. The only thing he remembered about almost two months of lessons was the ‘blindness’ incident.

Harry sat stoically, watching Lockhart flounce about the front of his classroom. “This, children, is how to defeat an enemy that is intent in blinding you.” The class watched as he almost blinded himself, flailing his wand about.

Harry stood. “Professor?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“Will that technique work against any opponent?”

“Of course it will. In fact, I used it against-”

“I’d love to see it in action.”

Harry whistled between his teeth, and Hedwig came soaring into the room, a streak of white against the dingy dark roof. “Hedwig, the professor is demonstrating a technique to defend against opponents trying to blind him.” The owl narrowed her eyes, staring at the bright yellow target. “I would love to see it in action. So...” He trailed off, and smiled. “Go get him!”

She shot off his shoulder like a rocket, the avian equivalent of a smart missile. Lockhart, seeing the fearsome bird of prey (even when about to be killed, his writer’s instinct kicked in), stumbled backwards. As he fell to the ground, Hedwig flared her wings, landing gently on his chest and pecking him once on the head.

“I have to be honest, professor, it doesn’t look that effective.”

Ever since Hermione's birthday, nothing had happened. No random attacks on Muggleborn students. No massive Legilimency induced headaches. Nothing. Harry, even with his excellent memory, was beginning to worry. He couldn't really remember what had happened during the six weeks between Hermione's birthday and Halloween in the original timeline, and that bothered him.

Deciding not to worry about it, he'd been helping his friends begin their work on Occlumency, not to mention some general physical fitness and broom skills. They grouched, bitched and moaned, but each of them completed their assigned 'homework'.

What hadn't helped with Harry's continued sanity was that, with him and Hermione being recognised as a couple, some of the more bigoted, and stupid, witches had decided that the line of Potter did not need to be 'dirtied' for a second generation by mixing Potter blood with a Muggleborn. Regardless of the fact that they were 12 and 13 years old, people had decided that Harry and Hermione, in the words of Cho Chang, 'must not breed another dirty mongrel. Harry must have an appropriate Pureblood to cleanse the taint from him'. The girls had decided to act on this one day, and Harry had not been impressed.

"So we're all agreed? We get Potter alone, and show him what proper witches are like?" Cho Chang was looking forward to this; Harry Potter should be dating her, not hanging around with a human/beaver hybrid. She was fairly certain that she would be able to tempt him away on her own, but if not, then, honestly, what teenage boy was going to turn down the idea of a group of girls, his for the taking? She was even jealous of that new weirdo first-year. How dare she just snog him after her sorting. That boy should be mine.

"Yeah. I'm still annoyed at Granger for keeping him off the market. Bloody Muggleborns. They don't know what it takes to please a real wizard."

Luna was sitting at the next table, doing her homework. That statement was plainly ludicrous. Her mother had ordered a package from a Muggle service, where she learned something called Victoria's

Secret, and her father had been smiling like a maniac for a week afterwards.

She wasn't quite certain, but she was very interested in learning what the secret was.

"It's Wednesday, right? Second years have Herbology as last lesson of the day, don't they?"

Marietta nodded. She wasn't particularly interested in Potter, but he was obscenely wealthy, and that worked for her. "Yeah. Why don't we ask Granger for some Herbology help? Greenhouse three, I think." The girls all nodded. Greenhouse three was where Professor Sprout had managed to cultivate over twenty of the rare Assyrian plant *Mimulus Mimbletonia*, which looked like a cactus, but, rather than spines, had pustles of a defensive toxin, harmless to humans, that was appropriately named 'stink-sap'.

"Perfect. Let's head on down now."

"Hey, Granger, you got a second? Need your help for this homework in Greenhouse three."

Hermione looked at Harry, and nodded to him. "I'll catch up to you in the library."

He smiled at her, squeezed her hand, and then wandered away, while Hermione wandered over to the back of Greenhouse three, where a group was gathered.

As one, the group of girls all poked their plants, allowing the torrent of stink-sap to fly into the air, where it all fell onto... Hermione.

Hermione felt the tears well up. What did I do to deserve this? She asked herself, blinking rapidly to clear the tears away.

One of the girls approached her, keeping a hand over her nose. "Now, maybe you'll understand!" The girl hissed. "Stay away from Potter! He deserves a real girl, not some ugly little know-it-all freak like you!"

A coughing from behind Hermione drew everyone's attention. Hermione spun round, to come face-to-face with her best, truest friend. Harry was stood there, staring at Hermione, before he shifted his glance to the group of girls.

When looking at Hermione, his eyes were full of love. Not pity, or sympathy for her predicament. Just a support and love that left her almost breathless. When he shifted his gaze, his eyes seemed to ignite with flames. Standing there, Hermione could almost feel the heat of Harry's rage, directed at the girls who had done this to her.

"Why?" He asked, his voice a sharp contrast to his eyes, icy cold.

One of the girls, a third-year with far too much cleavage, swayed over to Harry. "Harry, darling," She simpered, setting Hermione's teeth on edge. "Why would you want to be with this... thing?" She asked, staring at Hermione with disgust.

Harry stepped around her, conjuring a tissue, which he used to wipe Hermione's face with. She looked at him, feeling very scared at being so close and smelling so vile.

Harry leaned close, completely ignoring the smell. Because of his actions in the previous time-line, he was used to smells that would render most people sick. A little stink-sap was nothing. He stared into her eyes, smiling softly at her.

"Harry... how can you stand to be so close to me?" Hermione whispered.

His smile widened slightly. "No matter what, Hermione," he whispered, "you are always beautiful to me." With that, he leaned closer and kissed her. It wasn't a snogfest that curled her toes, or left her breathless, but it was gentle, tender, and filled with passion. After a moment, Harry stepped away, waving his wand at her. The stink-sap

was banished away, and air-freshening charms made breathing a lot easier.

She smiled warmly at him, raising her hand to her tingling lips.

Harry looked up at the group of girls stood there, gaping at him. With a jolt, he gave his thoughts on the matter. "Bitches, leave!" He snapped. As one, they fled from the greenhouse, not wanting to get on his bad side.

Halloween was rapidly approaching, leaving Harry to wonder what the hell to do. His best plan was to carry on with copying the original time-line, which meant attending Nick's Deathday party. He didn't really want to do that. It was awful last time, thanks to the array of dreadful-smelling food laid out.

More to the point, he wasn't sure how he could wrangle an invite. Since Nearly-Headless Nick was the Gryffindor house ghost, and he was a Ravenclaw, Nick had no reason to invite him. He decided to seek him out, and see what happened.

Harry found the Gryffindor ghost loitering in one of the classrooms near Gryffindor tower, reading through a translucent letter. "Blast them!"

"Sir Nicholas?" Harry called out politely. "Is everything okay, sir?"

Nicholas looked up. "Ah, young Potter. Delighted to see you, dear boy. Is there something I can do for you?"

"I was just having a wander round the school, sir. Heard you cussing. Is everything all right?"

Nick slumped. "My request to join the headless hunt has been denied again. You'd have thought being hit in the next 47 times with a blunt hatchet would have qualified me, wouldn't you?"

Harry nodded diplomatically, before a crazy idea occurred to him. "Sir... why don't you just remove it? I mean... you're already dead, so it won't hurt you."

“And how do I do that?” Nick snapped. “As you so rightfully pointed out, I’m dead, and I don’t have a sword.”

“The Bloody Baron does, sir. Why not get him to take it off the rest of the way?”

Nick looked introspective for a moment, before shaking his head. “The Bloody Baron, Mr. Potter, would not help me. It’s against his philosophy to render assistance.” He sighed. “It was a good idea, though.”

Harry held up his hand. “I might have an idea... What would you be prepared to do in order to join the Headless hunt?”

Nick floated closer. “Almost anything, Potter. What do you have in mind?”

“Walk with me, Sir Nicholas.”

Harry led the reluctant house ghost to the first floor, a set of rather dingy girls’ toilets. Inside, they could hear the sobbing and moaning of the appropriately named ghost.

“Harry... we really don’t want to go in here.” Nick warned gently. “She’s not the most sociable ghost in Hogwarts, even at the best of times.”

“Risk is part of the game if you wanna sit in that chair.” He muttered to himself as he pushed open the door, before wincing; why was he remembering movie quotes? “Come on, Nick. Don’t get if you don’t try.” He led the ghost in.

“Myrtle? You in here?” Harry called out. “I’d like to speak to you.” He stopped in the middle of the room, resisting the urge to open the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets and kill the serpent inside.

“What do you want?” Myrtle snapped, her head just visible above one of the toilet bowls. “This is a girls’ bathroom. You’re both boys.”

Sir Nicholas straightened up. "I assure you, madam, that I am no 'boy'. I am Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington."

"You're still male." Myrtle snapped. "And what do you want? I'm busy."

Harry cleared his throat, getting the attention of the bickering ghosts. "Myrtle, I'm Harry. I apologise for intruding on your time, but I have a favour to ask of you, and possibly something to offer in return."

Myrtle stared at Harry. "What?"

"Would you be kind enough to steal the Bloody Baron's sword and remove what's left of Sir Nicholas' neck?"

Myrtle gaped. "What?"

Harry resisted the urge to groan. I am speaking in English, aren't I? Didn't look at the snake... not speaking French... "Would you be willing to complete Sir Nicholas' beheading, so that he can join the Headless Hunt?"

She looked at Harry, then Nick, then back to Harry. "What's in it for me?" She pouted.

"Would you wait for a moment?" Harry gestured Nick over, so he could whisper quietly to him. "Nick, this is your chance."

Nick nodded. "What does she want, though?"

"Nick..." Harry wasn't sure how to continue. "Er... well, she looks to be about sixteen or so... and you know what sixteen year old girls are like nowadays..."

The old ghost reared back. "Absolutely not! It's not proper!"

Harry just shrugged. "Okay, then. If you don't want to lose that last little bit of neck..."

Myrtle drifted over. "Well?"

"I, er..." Nick looked extremely unhappy. "I might be willing to offer you something in return."

Moaning Myrtle's eyes lit up. "Ooh... I know just the thing I want, too." She looked him up and down ashamedly, making Harry shudder.

"Okay... well, Myrtle, if you'll go and grab the Baron's sword, we can get this over with. And then you can do... whatever it is you want to do." Myrtle was gone before he'd finished speaking, presumably to track down the Bloody Baron and nick his weapon.

"I'm really not sure about this, Harry." Nick said pathetically. "I mean... we're from two different eras. In my day, we wouldn't just do this sort of thing."

"Look at the plus side, Nick." Harry said, sort-of supportively. "You can join the Headless hunt. You can spy on all the teachers. Whatever you want. And, yes... you have to do Myrtle a... favour, but I'm sure it won't be that bad. Besides, it's not as though she's unattractive." He smiled warily. "And... well, I'm sure it's been a while for you..."

Myrtle reappeared, wielding a wickedly sharp sword and a manic grin. "I'm ready!"

Nick took a deep breath, ironic for a ghost, and nodded. Myrtle was already swinging, her aim perfect to cleave through the quarter inch of neck holding his head in place. It passed through, completing a job 500 years in the making as Nick's head fell to the floor. Myrtle had already dropped the sword, grabbing Nick's head from thin air as it fell.

"Harry!" Nicholas shouted. "Come to my Deathday part on Saturday. Bring your friends!"

Myrtle placed Nick's head on the floor. Harry was already retreating from the room as he saw Myrtle begin to crouch over the head...

It took two days for the mental image to clear itself. Each time Hermione came close to Harry, he began to shudder, before getting over himself and hugging the stuffing out of her.

Friday dawned as a drizzly overcast day. The group attended lessons, ate dinner, and lazed about the common room. Before the group split up for the evening, Harry stood up in front of Hermione. "Now, my dear... I want you to have one thing in mind when you go to bed tonight; 'I will avoid trolls.' 'I will avoid trolls.'" He looked at the rest of his friends. "Come on, guys, say it with me. 'I will avoid trolls.' 'I will avoid trolls.'"

Hermione rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out at Harry, but she remembered something she'd read in one of her very first magical books; words have power. Only mildly protesting, she joined his chant. "I will avoid trolls. I will avoid trolls."

Hufflepuff loyalty prompted Susan to begin chanting, "I will avoid trolls. I will avoid trolls."

Neville grimaced as he remembered that during Halloween of the previous year, he, along with Weasley and Finnegan, had attempted to claim the credit for Harry's rather dashing heroic rescue. "I will avoid trolls. I will avoid trolls. I will avoid Ron Weasley, which is pretty much the same thing."

Harry smiled at Neville's addendum. "I'm right there with you on that one."

Pretty soon, Harry had the whole of Ravenclaw house chanting "I will avoid trolls." It was, after all, rather good advice, and Ravensclaws were not stupid.

Saturday, 31st October, 1992 was a less than pleasant day. As always, Harry spent a few moments thinking quietly, wondering what his life would have been like if he'd grown up with his parents. Bloody hell... I don't think about this stuff for 364 days a year... and every bloody Halloween, I turn into a pathetic little child. Come on, Potter... suck it up and get the job done. He got up, showered and dressed, and headed down to the common room.

Unlike most mornings, where all three Ravenclaw girls were waiting for him (he was, after all, male and therefore genetically incapable of getting up early), only Luna was there. He had a rough idea of what was going on when she turned to face him, her eyes glowing a shiny white.

“Morning, Luna.” Harry said casually. “Anything new for me today?”

“The track remains on course.” Luna replied in her ethereal voice. “The changes made do not affect the flow of the river, Warrior. What was will be, now will be as then, and what is will be no different.”

“That’s good to know.” He replied. “Any more information on that brain dump you gave me?”

“The diverted flow remains, yet all is as it will be.”

“That’s no bloody use whatsoever. Have you thought about writing the greetings for birthday cards?”

Luna’s eyes faded to their normal pale silvery colour. “Oh, good morning, Harry. How’re you doing today?”

“Morning, Luna. I’m okay, thank you for asking.” Harry replied politely. “And yourself?”

“I’m a bit sad, to be honest. One of my friends just lied to me. It’s quite upsetting.”

Hermione and Padma came charging down the stairs, busy tucking in blouses and buttons. “Morning!” Hermione replied, bounding down into Harry’s arms. “How’re you doing today, Harry?”

“I’m fine.

“No, really.” Hermione insisted. Padma gazed at him with pleading eyes, while Luna smirked knowingly.

Harry wilted under the pressure. "Okay, fine... I hate Halloween. Always have. Something bad always happens on Halloween. That's why we were having that lovely communal chant last night."

"Your friends are here for you." Hermione promised, squeezing him into a Hermi-hug, followed by Padma and Luna. Harry accepted the hugs in the spirit they were given; loving support for a friend.

"Ah... Thank you." He sniffed, sounding suspiciously moist. He cleared his throat. "Time for breakfast."

On the stairs down to the Great Hall, Harry was pounced upon by Susan Bones, who attempted to strangle him and break his neck by throwing him downstairs. After accepting her hug (and trying to realign most of his vertebrae) Harry shook hands with Neville, and carried on, spotting Blaise waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs.

Harry nearly drew his wand and cursed his friend when he saw the book tucked under Blaise's arm. "What the hell is that?"

Blaise smirked. "I thought I'd read this fascinating little book my mother sent me. Apparently, Harry... you're a little famous. Something about... er... well, I'm sure that somebody somewhere has heard of you before."

"Have they?" Harry deadpanned. "Marvellous."

Once inside the Great Hall and seated, Harry tore into his breakfast food. After a few mouthfuls, he turned to Blaise. "I've not read that. Why don't you tell me about what happened on Halloween, according to..." He broke off to read the writer's name, "Eva A. Blowhard?"

Blaise opened the book, flipping through to the chapter that truly affected Harry's life. He cleared his throat, before speaking in a dramatic tone. "...the wizard known as He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named apparated to the Potter's hidden house in Godric's Hollow, appearing right outside their door."

"Hmm..." Harry mused. "Wrong, but please, continue."

“With a casual flick of his wand, he blew the door to the cottage away, storming inside to catch the Potters completely by surprise.”

“Again, wrong.” Harry replied.

“James Potter was killed instantly, facing the Dark Lord as he fumbled for his wand.”

Harry pulled the book away angrily. “Where the hell did this guy get his information from?” He quickly read through the text, committing it to memory. “This is all bollocks. How does this author know anything about what happened that night? There are only two witnesses... one of whom has never been asked, and another who’s floating about Albania as a spirit.”

Susan cleared her throat. “Well... you were only a baby, Harry. It’s not as though you can remember what happened back then.” A slowly rising eyebrow was her only response. “Can you?” Her voice was trembling slightly.

“I have pretty much total recall for my entire life, Sue. Practically everything, with a couple of minor exceptions, that I’ve ever experienced is all filed away in my brain, available to watch in my mind.” Harry suddenly became aware that several other people were listening into the conversation. “So, yes... I remember Voldemort’s attack on Godric’s Hollow.”

“What exceptions?” Hermione asked immediately.

“Unconsciousness.” Harry replied, then grinned sheepishly. “Or extreme boredom.” Which is why I don’t remember Flophart’s original lessons... I do recall having to act out scenes from his useless fiction...

An irritating voice behind him grabbed his attention. “Why so glum, Potter? Today’s a great day! It’s the anniversary that You-Know-Who was killed! Cheer up!”

Harry didn’t need to turn round to know that it was Ron Weasley irritating the shit out of him. I don’t understand why he’s such an arsehole this time around. Did being my friend tone him down

originally? Or did I just not notice? I remember him being a dick later on, but not this early... He began to run through his memories of the original Ron, stopping when a non-too gentle jab in his back refocused his attention.

"I was speaking to you, Potter." Ron's voice had grown harder. "You will not ignore me."

Slowly, Harry turned round. "You were speaking 'to me', or 'at me', Weasley?" He shook his head sadly. "Are you a complete arse, or are you just hamming it up for me?"

"What? Don't you celebrate the day that the worst menace to Wizarding society was vanquished?" He looked down haughtily at Harry. "Can see why you're not a Gryffindor."

Harry just snorted and turned back. Another jab, this one even harder, prompted him to turn round again. "I didn't dismiss you, Potter. I was talking to you, and I require an answer."

"No, Weasley, you weren't talking to me. You were spouting off without thinking, something I've heard you do quite a lot. Now, I'm going to go back to my breakfast, and you will stop touching me, or I'll break your wrist. You have now been warned." Harry slowly swivelled on the bench, just waiting for Ron to try again, as he inevitably would.

Ron was pissed. A mere little prick like Potter was dismissing him? He drew his wand with his right hand, before reaching forward to poke Potter again with the left. Fortunately for his continued good health, a pair of red-headed guardian angels appeared, each of them grabbing one of Ron's wrists.

"Why don't you sit down and eat your breakfast, Ron?" Fred said in a voice of iron. "Perhaps pissing off the guy who vanquished 'the worst menace to Wizarding society', as you put it, is not a good idea."

"Eat and be silent, Ron." George said in an equally hard voice. "And put your wand away. We don't pull wands on our friends."

"Potter's not my friend!" Ron spat viciously. "Pathetic little loser like him doesn't deserve my friendship."

"You keep thinking that, Ron. He does, however, deserve ours." The twins replied in unison, pushing him back to the Gryffindor table. They quickly returned to Harry's side. "Mind if we join you for breakfast?"

Harry gestured to the bench. "You two are always welcome, guys."

They sat down, one of Harry's left, and the other on Harry's far right, sitting next to Hermione. "Out of curiosity, does that invitation extend to any other Weasleys?"

"Er..." Harry pondered for a moment. "Well... your Mum seems cool... as long as your Dad washes his hands after playing with his rubber ducks, he's welcome, too. I've never met Bill or Charlie, so I don't have a problem with them, and I suspect that Percy's a bit of a dark horse."

"Percy's got a stick up his arse the size of the Whomping Willow, but he ain't a bad guy." Fred said.

"Yeah," George added, "once he gets laid, he'll probably be much cheerier."

"But," Harry continued, "your two youngest siblings aren't exactly impressive. One's a dick, and the other squeaks at me when I'm near, and stares at me when I'm not. To be honest, she creeps me out a bit."

"We did warn you about Ginny." They said in unison.

"Yes..." Harry sighed. "I'm sorry to say there won't be a big Potter/Weasley wedding in this generation. Don't get me wrong, I don't have anything against squeaky fangirls, but they don't exactly make me all tingly inside."

Fred clapped him gently on the back. "Don't worry about it, mate. If it's not meant to be, it's not meant to be. Don't want to force

anything.” He grabbed a coffeepot. “Now, what were you saying when we came up?”

George cleared his throat. “Actually, before you say anything, we know that Halloween’s a good day for most witches and wizards, but we know that today’s the anniversary that you lost your parents. We’re sorry.”

Harry gripped Fred’s shoulder, and reached round Hermione to do the same to George. “Thanks, guys.” As Harry’s hands dropped to his sides, Hermione squeaked loudly. “Oh, sorry about that, Hermione...”

With a fiery blush, she mock-glared at him. “Behave, Harry.”

“So...” Susan said, realising where Harry’s hand had gone on its way past. “You can remember what happened that night?”

“Yes.” Harry replied quietly. “Everything. It’s not something I wanna discuss at the moment. I’ve never talked about this.”

Fred and George realised that everything was getting a bit depressing, and decided to lighten the mood. “So, Harry... what are you going to be beating up tonight?”

Harry chuckled at the irreverent twins. “Not sure... something’ll turn up, though. It always does. I just hope it’s not a giant or a Dementor. Oh god... not a werewolf. Bet the bugger’ll try and hump my leg.”

The sour mood over, people chuckled.

“Oh, I forgot to mention; Nearly Headless Nick invited us all to participate in his Deathday party tonight.”

“Not seen him about for a while.” The twins said in unison. “We thought maybe he’d moved on.”

Harry paled. “Er... no. I sort of did him a favour... I think he’s been paying for it.”

“Oh?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah... I persuaded another one of the ghosts to lop the rest of his head off. Unfortunately, the other ghost was Myrtle... and I think she squeezed her payment out of him.”

Padma nodded slowly. “Yeah... she’s been particularly loud the last couple of days. Living up to the ‘Moaning’ of her name. No-one dares go near her bathroom.”

“If you want to keep your sanity intact, and your eyeballs from melting, I strongly recommend you don’t.” Harry replied sharply. “What I saw her do... man, it’s enough to put me off for life, and I’m only twelve.” In body. If it wasn’t for my Hermione’s obscene mind, I’d’ve been corrupted forever.

“Do I want to know?” Hermione asked, sighing at yet another Harry-changes-everything moment.

“No.” He shuddered lightly. “Believe me, if I’d known, I’d never have suggested it...” He shivered again. “So, do we fancy going to see hundreds of ghosts playing head hockey and walking through mouldy food?”

“Ooh, you make it sound so appealing...” Blaise deadpanned.

“It’s necessary.” Luna interjected suddenly, her eyes glowing.

“Oh, bugger...” Hermione muttered. “I hate that look.” She took a quick glance at everyone, who nodded slightly. “Yeah, we’re in. Hell’s Carrots, you coming, too?”

“Er...”

“Excellent.” Hermione said in a polite yet threatening tone. “We’ll pick you up outside your tower before it’s due to start.”

“Yes, Hermione.” They sighed in unison.

So... the game’s afoot.

The remainder of the day passed fairly slowly. Harry had disappeared after breakfast, and wasn't seen at lunch. During the early afternoon, the friends gathered together to look for him, heading up to his dorm room.

They saw the door to Harry's Portkey box open, and tentatively stepped inside, all of them falling behind Hermione as she stepped forward. "Bloody cowards..." She muttered. "Harry? You in here?"

In front of the console, a head appeared from the floor. "Yello?" He called out. "Hermione? What's up? Is something wrong?"

"No." Hermione replied, stepping forward and perching herself on the edge of the console. "What're you doing?"

"Er... tinkering, mainly." Harry replied sheepishly. "I've never liked Halloween... just felt like doing something with my hands, really."

Fred and George spoke as one. "Harry... I'm sure you could've come up with something better to do with your hands than play with... what is this thing?"

Harry smiled. "Welcome, gentlemen, to my dimensionally transcendental runically-powered armoured Portkey transit device. And yes, I know, it needs a better name."

"You portkeyed through the Hogwarts wards?" Twin one asked.

"How'd you manage that?" Twin two completed.

Right, that's it! Harry snapped. "Which one are you?" He demanded, pointing to the twin on the left. Veritas!

"I'm Fred." The twin replied, looking surprised as the word left his mouth.

With the faintest glint of light, Harry created a small blob of neurologically encoded paint on Fred's forehead. Only he could see it, but he'd forever be able to tell the twins apart. Ha! Finite Veritas.

“Cheers, Fred. And yes, I portkeyed through Hogwarts’ wards. As to how, I’m the Heir to the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw lines.”

“Wicked...” They breathed together, before Fred continued. “Can anyone with Founders’ Blood pass through? ‘Cause about fifteen percent of the older Wizarding families are connected to Hufflepuff.”

“No, only direct Heirs.” Harry corrected. “As to who Hufflepuff’s direct heir is, I don’t think there is one anymore. The main lines died out. As to ‘anyone’, Hogwarts is quite... protective. She’ll only let people pass through who don’t mean harm to the students or school. At the moment, that’s pretty much me.” And that’s why Voldemort never just portkeyed in and killed everyone. Cheers, Arx.

You’re more than welcome.

Bugger... forgot you can listen in. Harry thought for a moment. If Tom tried to come in here and kill people, would you fight him off?

My powers are limited, heir. I could seal doors and corridors, even activate some of the defences, but I was never designed to fight alone. I am the tool, not the wielder.

Good to know. I’ll keep that in mind.

“Huh...” George leaned over the hole in the floor. “So, what are you tinkering with? We’re quite good with tinkering.”

Harry glanced down at the mess he’d created in the floor. “I’m trying to figure out how to hook up a couple of spells to a computer console, so that they can gain power from the engine without damaging the electronics.”

“What spells?” Hermione asked excitedly. Padma caught Susan’s eyes and grinned.

“A Revelo and a Point Me spell. I’m trying to create a sensor array.” Also, if I can figure it out, I’d like to add a ward-detection and analysis charm. But, I’ll be damned if I can figure this one out.”

“That sounds... complex.” Hermione offered after a moment.

Harry grinned. “So is the Marauder’s map. Think about it, though. A piece of parchment that has the ability to track every single person inside an ancient, massive, mystical castle. That’s a hellishly complex piece of magic, and four fifth years made it.”

“Oh?” George asked, leaning a little closer. “You’re the Son of Prongs, you’ve told us that, but you never said who the others were.”

“I know.” Harry replied, winking at the twin. “Maybe one day, George... if you’re good.”

“Meanie.” George pouted.

“But, if I could find a way to replicate that, add those charms into the computer, think of what I’d have! The GPS can be used to scan everywhere on the planet. Combine that with the recognition charms on the Marauder’s Map, and you can find anyone... anywhere! A kid goes missing, just tap into the sensor array, and you can find them.”

“It sounds good.” Padma said supportively. “Do you know how to do it?”

“Not a bloody clue.” Harry replied casually. “But then again, part of growing up is learning how to make things work. I’ll probably figure it out one day.”

Hermione pondered for a moment. “What about adding in Ordinance Survey maps? That way, you’ve not only got tracking, but 3D imaging as well.”

Harry chuckled. “One step at a time. First of all, I need to decode the map without damaging it, then replicating those spells into the box.” He glanced down piteously, as though if he stared at it long enough, it’d just create itself. “Ah, well...” He grabbed the side of the flooring, hauling himself up.

All four females present saw the muscles on Harry's arms flex as he pulled himself up. He wasn't Arnie, that was true, but he was wiry and strong, especially for his age and previous history. Hermione absently noted that when she was older, she'd like to explore those muscles a little more closely... She came back to herself as she heard Harry speak.

"...get something to eat before we go to Nick's party. I doubt we'll want to eat anything that's there."

"We'll go down to the kitchens, then."

After sending Fred and George down to the kitchens to grab food and drink for all nine of them (no point in sending Hermione off on her S.P.E.W. quest quite so early), they slumped into one of the new rooms in the box.

Halfway through her sandwich, Hermione asked a question that had been bugging her for hours. "Anyone else got a bad feeling about today?"

Everyone else raised their hands. Of course, Harry's wasn't just a feeling, but actual knowledge and experience. He was aware, though, that of all his Hogwarts years, this one had the potential for things to go very badly. A mis-timed glance at the Basilisk's eyes would mean that the victim would be killed instead of petrified. He knew that he had to keep away from the Basilisk, or the victims in order to save their lives.

I hate this... why can't I just kill the bloody thing now? Bloody causality. I hate Quantum theory. He sat and stewed until Neville cleared his throat, telling him it was time to head down to Nick's party. Let's be careful, but let's get it done.

The group ambled downstairs, heading for the dungeon where Nick was holding his party. As they walked in, they saw the Hogwarts' ghosts ambling round, all of them looking politely bored. Then again, considering that they spent all their time together during the year, a social gathering celebrating someone's death would probably get boring over the centuries.

The living mingled with the dead, not really enjoying meaningful conversation, until the sound of a herd of horses filled the air. The Headless Hunt galloped into the room, leering at the humans, until they came across Nick.

“Ah, Nicholas!” The lead rider said jovially. “How’s it going? Still hanging in there?”

Nicholas calmly removed his head, tucking it neatly under his arm. “No.”

“Ah...” The horsemen looked utterly defeated. “Well... about time.”

“Play nice.” Harry said in an ice-cold tone.

The horseman glared at Harry. “Do you know who I am?”

“I would hazard a guess that you’re Sir Patrick Delaney-Podmore, the leader of the Headless Hunt.” Harry answered smoothly. “And, if I’m honest, I think you’re a bit of a prick.”

Sir Patrick laughed. “You have gumption, boy. Let me guess... you’re here to tell me how Nick’s so very scary!”

Harry shook his head. “No... I’m here because Nick asked me to be here. Unlike some I could mention, Sir Nicholas is a man of grace and breeding. Poise and elegance. A true gentleman...” He looked Sir Patrick up and down. “What’s your excuse?”

The ghost huffed for a moment, realising that a ‘live ‘un’ had got the better of him, before turning his horse round. The Headless hunt turned as one and rode over to the buffet, passing through it in an attempt to taste the food while shooting Harry dirty looks.

“Pilllocks...” Harry muttered, turning back to his friends. “I don’t know about you... but this party’s kinda lost it’s appeal.” He turned to Luna. “We been here long enough?” She nodded slowly.

Fred and George smiled. "I think we'll stick about for a bit, Harry. All sorts of pranking opportunities with the dead."

"Okay." Harry turned to the rest, who were only too eager to leave the cold and damp dungeon. The smell of the rotting food was getting to everyone. "Let's get out of here..."

The group left the dungeon at a brisk walk, heading down one of the deserted corridors on the first floor. Hermione cleared her throat nervously. "Remember that bad feeling I said I had?" Susan and Padma nodded jerkily. "Well... it's back, and bigger than before." The dim lighting in the corridor only exacerbated the feelings of uneasiness.

Harry nodded slowly. "I'm right there with you, My Only. I think heading back to the common room would be a really good idea right about now."

Padma squealed loudly, scaring the crap out of everyone else. "Can you hear that?" She groaned.

As one, they all stopped, listening for any sound that might help them figure out the sense of foreboding. §Let me kill... let me tear... I smell food... big food... I'm so hungry... let me eat you...§

"There!" Susan whispered. "Can you hear it? Some kind of... noise." She finished pathetically. "I... I can't tell what it is."

I can. It's Blink, enjoying her freedom after five decades of boredom. I only hope it's just a petrified Mrs. Norris. "This would be a good time to make like a shepherd and get the flock out of here." Harry replied firmly, striding forward into the gloom. "Let's not hang around."

As they passed the dark corner, they could see the lights were on in the main corridor, revealing several things; the floor was flooded, there was writing on the wall, and something was hanging from one of the wall sconces. He approached cautiously, just in case the Basilisk was still loitering about.

Focussing his magic, he let out a massive pulse, acting as magical radar, bouncing off anything with a magical core. He quickly processed the results. Okay... fourteen signatures in the immediate vicinity, that's right... one slightly magical cat, six other people and seven wands. Slight trace to the left... that's probably Myrtle loitering about her pisspot... Ah, there it is. The Chamber's closing. Damn, that was too close. Realisation struck him with the force of a Bludger. Shit, Blink was still here! Holy fuck, she could've killed us all!

Blaise cleared his throat. "We really should leave here, Harry."

Harry was about to nod, when he felt the change in the ambient magical flow of the castle. This usually happened when classes were let out, or feasts were finishing. It meant hundreds of magical cores were moving. Too late, now. "It's a little late for that, Blaise." With a sigh, he leaned against the wall, managing to avoid smearing the bloody writing. "This could be a problem."

"What's that?" Susan asked, pointing at the straggly mass hanging from the wall sconce.

Chuckling softly, before realising that was a bit morbid, Harry answered. "I do believe that is Mrs. Norris." He replied casually. "And by the way, that writing? It's written in blood. Do try not to get it on your clothes. It's not human, though. Doesn't smell metallic enough."

"Y-You can tell human blood by smell?" Neville asked shakily.

"Bled enough times." Harry said, not looking up. "Dumbledore's coming. Make sure you don't touch anything."

The sounds of dozens of well-fed children stampeding through the corridors assaulted their ears, as the feast finally let out, the students heading back to their corridors.

"What is going on here?" An angry voice shouted. Harry didn't need to look up to know Filch had just appeared on the scene. "What mess have you made now?"

There, on the wall, scrawled in chicken's blood was the message 'The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the heir; beware!'

"I'll see you all expelled for befouling the castle!" Filch sneered, before he stepped round Harry, seeing his beloved cat hanging from the sconce. His face contorted into a mask of rage, but whatever he was about to say was cut off as the scion of Bad Faith appeared in the hallway. With long-practiced Dark Arts experience, he took in the scene in front of him.

"Enemies of the Heir, beware! You'll be next, Mudbloods!"

Harry's pinkie twitched, sending a couple of non-verbal spells at Malfoy. Harry was certain that he'd find that anal-itching hex and burning urine hex quite sufficient to keep him occupied, before he straightened up. "Good evening, Professor Dumbledore."

The old man pushed his way through the gaping students, quickly taking stock of the situation. "All students return to their common rooms. Mr. Potter, you and your friends remain behind, please." No-one moved. "Now." Dumbledore's voice didn't get any louder, but that single word snapped every student to attention as they near-ran back to their dormitories.

"You killed my cat!" Filch snapped at Harry. "I'll kill you!"

"Touch me and you'll lose your arm." Harry replied nonchalantly. "If you use the brains God gave a concussed duck, you'd be able to see that your cat is not dead."

"Indeed." Dumbledore, who'd been inspecting the cat intently, looked up in surprise. "And your conclusion. Mr. Potter?"

"She's still alive." He grimaced. "Sadly." He added the last word in a whisper only Hermione heard. "It appears, though, that her life processes have been... well, put on hold, I would guess. She appears to be frozen, but she's not cold. It's like she's in stasis. Very strange."

Lockhart minced up, his face still scratched from Hedwig's demonstration several weeks earlier, immediately deciding to 'help'. "My office is nearest, Headmaster; just up the stairs. Please, feel free to-" He cut off as Dumbledore had already picked up Mrs. Norris and was striding towards Lockhart's office, Filch following him, fat tears streaking down his face as he looked at his beloved cat, hanging lifelessly in the old man's arms.

I wonder if those rumours about him dressing her up in a tutu and... Harry trailed off as he felt bile rise up in the back of his throat. Never mind.

They arrived at Lockhart's office, where the portraits were preening themselves; Harry saw several with hair in rollers, and one of them looked suspiciously like he was wearing a mudpack on his face. Shaking his head, he watched Dumbledore place the cat on the desk, examining it carefully, while McGonagall was waving her wand, casting several diagnostic charms over the prone body.

"It was definitely a curse that killed her, probably the Transmogrifian Torture. I've seen it used many times, so unlucky I wasn't there, I know the very counter-curse that would have saved her..." Lockhart trailed off as Filch let out a crying whimper at the word 'torture' being used to describe his beloved cat. In the original timeline, Harry's main worry at this point was that he would be blamed, and expelled. Now, he was worried about the fact that he hadn't even spotted Blink when she was still out in the corridors. A basilisk must have an immense magical presence. Why didn't I spot her?

"...remember something very similar happening in Ouagadougou," said Lockhart, "a series of attacks, the full story's in my autobiography, which I'm sure you've all bought, of course. I was able to provide the townsfolk with various amulets which cleared the matter up at once, and-" He let out a yelp, and then turned around, scowling at Snape.

Harry, having heard enough from Lockhart to last both his lifetimes, had realigned the mirror that was on the wall, and shot a wandless stinging hex at it, which ricocheted and hit Lockhart in the bum. Thinking that Snape had hexed him, he spun around, thankfully

distracting him from carrying on the shite that was spilling from his mouth like a sewer.

“She’s not dead, Argus. She has been petrified.” said Dumbledore.

“Ah, I thought so!” Lockhart spoke up, and Harry shot another stinging hex off the mirror, hitting the pompous windbag in the crotch. The blonde collapsed, clutching his groin and weeping piteously.

“Severus!” Dumbledore looked annoyed at his Potions professor. “Please, refrain yourself.”

Snape looked livid, and started to protest. “I haven’t done anything! It was probably Potter, the attention seeking-”

Harry strode forward. “Silence, idiot. Don’t you know that it’s better to be silent and considered a fool than to open your mouth and prove it?” He handed his wand over to Dumbledore without asking, the old man immediately knowing what he wanted. A quick casting of *Priori Incantatum* revealed that Harry’s most recent spells were from Transfiguration classwork; nothing dark, and nothing that could be remotely classed as an offensive or combat magic.

“Harry has nothing to do with Professor Lockhart’s sudden... incapacitation, and certainly nothing to do with the Petrification of Mrs. Norris.”

“I am curious as to what Potter and his cronies were doing down that corridor, and why they weren’t at the feast.” Snape slimed. “It’s certainly out of their way.”

“We were at Sir Nicholas’ Deathday party. We were on our way back to Ravenclaw tower for the evening when we discovered Mrs Norris.”

“Without any supper?” Snape’s voice was oilier than triple-thick mayonnaise. “I rather doubt the ghosts served any food fit for the living.”

"We ate in our dormitory before we attended the party, thank you. We asked Sir Nicholas about food last week, and knew beforehand that we should eat before we arrived." Ha, deal with it, slimy.

Snape just sneered at his new nemesis. "Headmaster, it is obvious to me that Potter here has something to do with this situation, and is simply being dishonest." His sneer escalated as he stared at Harry through hooded eyes. "Perhaps if he had some of his ill-gotten privileges removed until he decided to come clean, it might prompt him to be more honest. Since he has already been implicated in sabotaging Slytherin equipment, I suggest removing him from the Ravenclaw Quidditch team until he is ready to tell us the truth."

"My wand has been checked, showing I had nothing to do with any of this. I've answered all of your questions with satisfactory answers that can be checked with a third party to confirm their veracity. It's been proven, without a shadow of a doubt, that I had nothing to do with that unfortunate," he stopped for a moment to snigger, which infuriated the Potions Master no end, "incident with the brooms, and you publicly apologised to me for that the next day."

"In the instance, I must agree, Severus; there is no evidence in this matter that Mr. Potter was doing anything other than merely walking down the corridor and discovered the scene. You will not discuss this matter with anyone, and you will not do anything to Mr. Potter. Do you understand?" Although Dumbledore liked to project the image of a kindly grandfather, in this instance, there was a thread of iron in his voice, and Snape knew, immediately, that the only answer here was the one Dumbledore wanted to hear.

"Of course, Headmaster."

"Argus, Professor Sprout has a crop of mandrakes currently growing. As soon as they have matured, she will harvest them, and I will have a potion made that shall restore Mrs. Norris."

"I'll make it." Lockhart butted in. "I must have done it a hundred times, I could whip up a Mandrake Restorative Draught in my sleep-"

"Excuse me," said Snape icily, "but I believe I am the Potions Master at this school."

True, you are a Potions Master, and a very good one, but you're an absolutely wank teacher. "May we be excused, Professor? We'd like to return to our dormitories now." Harry asked, his face and tone the very personification of innocence.

"Yes, Mr. Potter. You and your friends are dismissed."

The students quickly left, splitting up to their various Common rooms, but not before Susan had hugged the stuffing out of Harry, and both Neville and Blaise had slapped him on the back, leaving him quite touched.

Hermione was sat in the Common room, Padma and Luna sat near her while Harry was pacing in front of the fireplace. She smiled brightly. "In my defence, it wasn't a troll."

Harry stopped his pacing, looked at her for a moment, and then smiled, before breaking out in to laughter, his serious mood broken. "No, no it wasn't. Well, let's get some sleep. It's Sock Quidditch tomorrow. Got some people to beat."

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, Children of all ages! The Underground Quidditch League is proud to present the first match of the season. Last season's shield holders, Beware of the Badgers, against the first team in Sock Quidditch; Norfolk Enchants. I'm Lee Jordan, and with me are the Weasley twins. This evening's entertainment is brought to you by the Quibbler, the best source of information that isn't the Daily Prophet." Lee put down the parchment he was reading from, and smiled at the crowd. "Here come the mighty Norfolk Enchants. They've got a change in line-up this season, replacing seventh-year Nymphadora Tonks with first-year Luna Lovegood as a Beater. The other Beater is Hermione Granger, second-year Ravenclaw with a wicked eye and deadly aim."

"That's right, Lee, we've watched her in training, and she's lethal. We should keep an eye on this girl, we can expect great things from her in the future." Fred smiled.

“That, and she threatened to brain us with her Beater’s tube if we said anything bad about her.” George added.

“The Keeper for the Enchants is Blaise Zabini, second-year Slytherin. This guy is cool, calm and collected, a master of stoicism. Will the Slytherin Spock be able to keep a clean sheet?” Lee put down the parchment again. “Anybody who knows what a ‘Spock’ is, please, let us know.”

“The Chasers for the Enchants are a triple threat attack force, spanning three houses; Neville Longbottom of Gryffindor, Susan Bones of Hufflepuff and Padma Patil of Ravenclaw. Last season, these three developed tactics that were quickly adopted by other teams; will these three be able to wow us again?”

“Absolutely, Lee, the captain has been them hard to get them in to league-winning shape, and you can tell; they look hungry out there.”

“The Captain of the Enchants is the ever-cheerful, unless you catch him first thing in the morning, Harry Potter of Ravenclaw. The creator of the UQL has been studying the other teams, and he’s shown some pretty good tactical acumen, nearly as good as our own Oliver Wood.”

“Indeed, Lee, who knows what would’ve happened if Oliver Wood and Harry Potter were on the same team?”

“We would introduce Diggory’s Beware of the Badgers, but Professor Flitwick is calling for the two captains to come forward and shake hands. The hands are shaken. Diggory’s pulled his hand back, scrubbing it on his pants. Don’t worry, Diggory, he probably won’t sneak in your dorm later on.”

“Harry Potter has immediately spun backwards, eyes searching for the very elusive snitch. Enchants’ Chasers are striding forward, rapid passing making it pretty pointless for me to shout out names, because by the time I’ve said their name, somebody else has it. Patil shoots! 1-0 to the Enchants.”

"It seems that Enchants' Chasers have been training hard, George, leaving them in top shape."

"I couldn't agree more, George, they're like a well-oiled machine."

"Aren't you George?"

"Yeah, probably."

Lee Jordan looked at the twins; even though he was in his fourth year of schooling with them, they still confused him. "Well, anyway, during that fascinating analysis by Hogwarts' premiere pranksters, Longbottom has put in another goal, while Zabini has saved a shot, leaving the Enchants 2-0 up. Potter is streaking across the pitch in a hurry. Looks like a uniform malfunction. Hey, Harry, get a tan, you'll end up blinding someone!"

"Time out for the Enchants while their Captain tries to cover his arse with a new pair of shorts."

"Thank you, Professor Flitwick. For any statistic fans out there, this is the seventh match that our Charms Professor has refereed, and he's already had to go to Madam Pomfrey twice for calming draughts. And the game restarts. Diggory's spotted something, appears to be going after the snitch. Meanwhile, Zabini forces another excellent save, with Granger managing to accidentally hit someone in the crowd with a Bludger."

"Not to worry, Lee, it's only Ron. Luckily, the Bludger managed to hit him the head, so there's no damage. I don't think she likes you like that, Ron, so I guess that hand gesture is all you'll be doing tonight."

"Bones has managed to put the Quaffle in the goal, and it's 3-0 to the Enchants. They're still looking strong out there, while the Badgers appear to be tiring already."

"You see, Lee, this is where conditioning pays off. If you've seen the muscles in Granger's legs, and judging by some of the shouts coming from Ron, he has, and... ooh, that looks like it had to hurt. Yet again,

it appears that Hermione's had an equipment malfunction, as once again, a Bludger has managed to hit Ron in the face."

"Absolutely, George, that looked uncomfortable. Anyway, while Ron tries to put his nose back in to shape and stop the bleeding, the game continues, with both teams put... Seriously, Ron, just pinch it, you don't need to flick blood at laughing first-years. The game's getting good, and... was that the snitch?"

"Yes, Potter's chasing after it, he's firing at it quickly. Look at that snitch go."

"Diggory's spotted the snitch but he's badly out of position. He's heading towards it, blocked by Bones, who just happened to have wandered in to his path. Oh, get up, Diggory. Potter's still chasing, and... Yes! Potter shoots the snitch, and wins the game 18-0."

"Well, that was an entertaining game. We saw excellent play, good sportsmanship, and Ron Weasley got hit in the face twice. Thanks, Hermione. I'm Lee Jordan, saying goodnight!"

– CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT –

Throwing a Hissy Fit

For the next week, the only thing that Hogwarts students could talk about was the Petrification of Mrs. Norris. The cat was soundly hated by the students of the school, since she always grassed up their... not-quite-within-the-rules activities, but none of them truly wished her harm. Out of the school, definitely, but not harm.

Harry had observed Ginny Weasley sitting unhappily in the Great Hall, her brother Ron sitting as far away as possible from her. If I didn't know the little bitch better, I'd be inclined to go and sit there next to her. He mused sadly. His friends quickly came and sat next to him, sharing of breakfast.

After breakfast, the second years headed for History of Magic. Harry settled himself into his seat, preparing for two hours of napping while his auto-quill took notes for him.

He was finally dozing, when Hermione raised her hand. It took almost four minutes to Binns to notice her arm waving in the air.

"Yes, Miss... Granley?"

"It's 'Granger', sir." Hermione replied, managing to avoid rolling her eyes. "You've been here for a long time, haven't you, Professor?"

Binns nodded, a little shocked that someone had actually asked a question. "I have, Miss Granger." He replied after a moment. "This is my 86th year teaching here, 41 of them as a ghost."

"You know you're a ghost?" Blaise blurted out, before slamming his hand over his mouth.

Binns turned slowly to Blaise. "Contrary to popular opinion, Mr. Zabini, I'm not completely stupid, nor am I ignorant." He snorted. "You think I like teaching endless classes on Goblin rebellions? No, unfortunately, this is what the Ministry has mandated that I must teach."

Harry propped his head on his hands. "Is that why you always deliver your lectures in a monotone, sir?"

"Pretty much, Mr. Potter." Binns nodded. "I've been teaching the same damned thing for decades. Sweet Merlin, even I'm bored with it." He turned back to Hermione. "Now, Miss Granger, you had a question?"

"Er..." Hermione was a bit flummoxed. "I wanted to ask you about the Chamber of Secrets, sir."

"Ah... would you like the official version, or the actual truth of the matter?" Binns asked. By now, every student was paying attention to the old ghost.

"Both." Harry said quickly. "Official first, then the real answer."

"Very well." Binns took a moment to gather his thoughts. "As you are all no doubt aware, Hogwarts was created a thousand years ago by the four greatest witches and wizards of their age."

"1,005 years, actually." Harry said.

"Mr. Potter, you asked for the official version." Binns rebuked sharply. "Please allow me to continue."

"Sorry, sir."

"Now, Helga Hufflepuff, Godric Gryffindor, Salazar Slytherin and Rowena Ravenclaw built Hogwarts. For over a decade, they worked together, teaching magic in safety from the Muggles. At that time, there was very few people living here in Northern Scotland. That's why they picked this area, and warded it as heavily as they could. However, an argument rose up between the Slytherin and Gryffindor, and Slytherin left the school. According to rumours, Slytherin built a secret area, with a monster inside, that would purge the school of all those who were not worthy of learning magic.

“Naturally, the school has been searched many times, and no ‘Chamber of Secrets’ has ever been discovered.” He leaned back slightly. “That is the official version. There is no Chamber.”

“And the truth?” Hermione asked, leaning forward in her chair. This was riveting stuff. Never had History of Magic been this interesting.

“The truth, Miss Granger... is a beautiful and terrible thing,” Binns said heavily, “and is often subject to... reinterpretation. However, the truth of the matter is this.” He turned to Harry. “You seem to have knowledge about this, so feel free to chime in.” Harry nodded.

“In 985AD, the Founders gathered and began their work on constructing Hogwarts. This included warding the area, planting the Forbidden Forest and digging the lake. It was intended that the Forest and Lake contain a wide array of magical creatures. The school opened in 987AD, with a mere nine students.

“The famous argument between Slytherin and Gryffindor has been reinterpreted over the centuries. No-one really knows what it was about.” Binns looked at Harry. “Do you know, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes, sir.” Harry replied dutifully. “As I said in the Great Hall last year, Slytherin believed that Muggleborns should be taken from their families and raised solely in the Wizarding world. He believed both worlds should be completely separate from each other.”

Binns nodded. “I understand his point. However, Gryffindor disagreed. He believed that Slytherin’s views were extreme, prompting the separation.” At this point, he hesitated. “Fifty years ago, the rumours regarding the Chamber of Secrets came up again. One of the students was killed, and another student expelled for the actions. However, no-one really knows for absolute certainty if the Chamber is real. That is the real story.” Binns sighed again. “Now, shall we return to our Goblin rebellions?” Even Binns didn’t look impressed. “Actually, no. I’ve a better idea. Each of you will need to read the textbook, and provide the appropriate essay on it’s due date. Instead, we shall discuss more relevant history. We shall start with the formation of the Ministry of Magic in 1215...”

That evening found the group in the library, hunting mercilessly through the stacks for more books on the history of Hogwarts and any information regarding the Chamber of Secrets. Hermione had even had the idea of looking through old copies of the Daily Prophet, hoping to find information about the dead student.

She'd opened the archive for 1942, deciding to start at exactly fifty years, and work her way forward, quickly scanning through the obituaries. Harry was sitting quietly, having finished with his work when he noticed Susan rolling her shoulders repeatedly, looking very uncomfortable. He leaned in close.

"Susan, you okay?"

The redhead shook her head, glancing round. "Not really. I..." She trailed off, starting to blush.

"Susan, why are you blushing?" He saw her rub her shoulder, right over her bra strap, and he started to understand. "Ah. I'm guessing that you need a shopping trip for underwear... er, with a better fit?"

She nodded, then winced as her bust moved with her, pulling the straps tight.

"Well, I'm not Gladrags or Madam Malkin's, but I can do permanent conjuration, and I can make something for you that should last you until you can go home for Christmas, or contact your aunt."

"How will you make it the right size? I don't want to take my robe off; with the shirt I've got on, they're a bit... er... prominent."

"I'll just use my wand to take exact dimensions. I warn you, it'll tickle, and I'll probably blush as I conjure it."

"Could you?"

"Yes, he will." Hermione leaned in, having noticed Susan's discomfort, but not realising that Harry could help. "Come on, Harry, the poor girl's in pain."

“Okay.” Harry got his wand out, performing some subtle scans of Susan’s upper torso, measuring everything. He almost forgot the measurements as Susan felt the spell tingling around her body and started giggling.

“Over here.” Harry led Hermione and Susan back to the stacks, where nobody could see them. “Okay, let’s see how good I am.” He pointed his wand at the table, focused with all of his mind, and a black lace bra appeared on the table. It was perfect; functional, form-fitting and sexy enough for a teen to appreciate it, without Amelia Bones issuing an immediate arrest warrant for him. “I’ll set up a repelling ward, and stand guard out here; Hermione can keep an eye out while you try this on.”

Susan, while normally very shy, decided that it was pretty, and lace, and her chest really hurt, so she agreed, sliding her robes off her shoulder, putting on the new bra. It was perfect; millimetre perfect and very flattering, it supported her chest like nothing she’d ever felt before.

“What do you think?”

“I think with boobs like yours, you’ll never be single unless you won’t to.” Hermione suddenly looked shocked, slamming her hand over her mouth. “Er, I mean, it looks fine.”

Susan laughed, putting her top back on and carrying her robes over her arm. A flick of Hermione’s wand dispelled the repelling wand, and they approached Harry, who was waiting. Susan immediately kissed him on the cheek and whispered in his ear, before heading back to the table.

“What did she want?” Hermione, luckily, didn’t do jealousy... at least, not with her immediate friends. They’d all got the ‘back off, he’s mine!’ vibe. Or, more accurately, Harry’s ‘back off, I’m hers!’ vibe.

“Matching knickers. Another time, I think.”

“Can I come and see you when I need clothes?”

Harry hugged her close, his hands squeezing her hips gently as she leaned in to his hands. "I'll be happy to make you whatever naughty underwear you want."

She blushed, stammered and headed straight back to the table, a private smile on her face.

Ron Weasley had sauntered in to the library, looking for someone he could copy homework off, as he had four assignments due in the next day, and he hadn't started yet. He saw Potter's study group in the corner, and headed straight over, knowing that they had the best grades in the year.

"Hello-lo-lo-lo." Ron's eyes fixed themselves on Susan's chest, which appeared to be clad in black lace under a white top, and looked delicious. He stretched his hand out, to get a firm grasp on those glorious globes, when a massive tome, the size of a tombstone, suddenly crashed down on the table, unfortunately crushing Ron's hand and breaking his wrist.

"Here we are, Susan; 'Chastity Charms and Amorous Idiot Castration Hexes' by Hans Offnow and I. Sedno." Harry saw Ron drag his busted wrist out, it hanging limply and already starting to swell to an impressive size. "Do you mind, Ronnie? You're in my seat."

He quickly pushed the gonk out of the way, sitting down. "Anyone find anything yet?" He heard Ron whimpering as he staggered away.

Padma looked up. "Nothing on the Chamber of Secrets that Professor Binns didn't tell us." She closed her book with a slam. "This is just weird. How can it be such a huge legend without more being written about it? I just don't get it."

Blaise spoke up. "Perhaps we should return to the scene of the crime. A more in-depth investigation may be beneficial."

Harry shook his head. "Way ahead of you, Blaise. I checked the area already. There's nothing there. That bloody message is still on the wall, though, which is curious. Blood should have dried by now. Could just be scrubbed off, but it's still there."

"That is curious." Blaise said. "Do we know why?"

I suspect that when Blink looked at it, she petrified the blood onto the wall. That'll need to be cleaned with the Mandrake restorative draught when it's made. "Don't have any definitive answers." Harry replied. "I could speculate, but I don't like doing that."

Hermione leaned in closer to him. "Share, Harry."

"Very well." Harry sighed dramatically. "I suspect that whatever petrified Mrs. Norris also had an effect on the blood on the wall. That's why it can't be removed. However, without most people knowing what petrified her, it's a lot more difficult to say." And that's nearly true, as well.

"'Most' people, Harry?" Blaise asked.

Harry nodded. "Well, whoever or whatever was doing the petrifying, they'd know." And so do I, but that's not really relevant. "I hate mysteries. I'm the type of guy that likes to turn to the last page in the book to find out who did it." A fact that really annoyed my Hermione in the future.

Padma leaned forward. "Okay, so we can't answer the 'How' it was done. Let's see what we can do. 'Why' is also a difficult question. 'Where' is pretty obvious. Although, a sub-question of 'Why there?' could be asked."

"Very logical, Padma." Harry complimented. "Unfortunately, there's no real way to know for sure why that particular location. I believe the most relevant question we should be asking is 'Who?' Who would want to set a monster loose? Especially considering the old legend that Binns told us about. In recent history, it's been recorded that Slytherin hated Muggles and Muggleborns, wanting to remove the 'taint' of anyone other than a pureblood. So, who would set a monster on people?"

"My first bet is Malfoy." Neville said. "Did you hear him in the corridor? 'You'll be next, Mudbloods!' Just reeks of evil to me."

“True.” Susan replied. “And he doesn’t like half-bloods or anyone he considers ‘Blood Traitors’. He’s from an old, pureblood family that have been in Slytherin for as long as anyone can remember.”

“It’s not Draco Malfoy.” Harry said absently, reaching for another book.

“And how do you know?” Hermione asked.

Harry didn’t even need to think. “Because Draco Malfoy is lacking two key personality aspects to pull off an attack of this nature; self-control and patience. If he really got control over a mons...” he trailed off. “Okay, I refuse to call it a ‘monster’. We’re not five years old here. If he had some creature that could petrify or kill people, he would just unleash it and let it ‘purge’ every first generation and half-blood here. He wouldn’t stop with just a cat. It’s not flashy enough for him.”

Padma, Blaise and Hermione nodded, with Blaise speaking up. “True... and a well-reasoned analysis of Malfoy.”

“Thank you.” Harry sighed. “No, there’s someone a lot smarter pulling the strings here, and I have to say, I don’t really like it. Smart people with the magical equivalent of a weapon of mass destruction make me nervous.”

“Maybe we could stake out that corridor?” Susan offered. “Auntie’s told me about stakeouts.”

And die horribly? Nuh-uh. “I don’t really see the point, Sue.” Harry replied nonchalantly. “We don’t even know if the attack happened there. I mean, the cat was hanging from a wall sconce. How the hell would a cat get up there?”

“Another good point.” Blaise admitted. “It’s a shame we don’t see this fine, logical mind during every day activities, young Harry.”

“Piss off, Blaise.” Harry shot back, without any heat. “I know I’ve not told you I hate you for several days, so here it is; I hate you, you smug git.”

“Ah, young Harry, some of us have every right to be smug.” Blaise replied, deadpan.

“Sod off. You’re only five weeks older than I am.” Harry grinned. “And we both know that youthful stamina will always beat old age.”

“Ah, but old age and trickery will always beat youthful stamina.” The two snickered between themselves.

“When you’re quite finished?” Hermione said in a haughty voice. “Shall we return to the minor matter of figuring out what’s attacking our school?”

Both boys slumped in their seats, muttering “Sorry, Hermione.”

“Right, then. Let us conclude what we do know; the legend of the Chamber of Secrets appears to be true, but we have no way of confirming this, nor do we know where it is. We don’t know who is behind this attack, nor do we know how it was done. We don’t even know where it was done. In short, we don’t know a bloody thing.” Hermione leaned back in her chair. “Not exactly a motivational speech, I know.”

Harry cleared his throat. “Allow me, Hermione; we know that whatever did this is powerful. Petrifying someone takes very powerful magic. We know that whoever or whatever did this is capable of writing. That means that there is a human somewhere in the mix. The rumours of a ‘monster’ in the Chamber must be true, if the Chamber is real. Ergo, we have a person controlling said monster, and leaving messages. Since Mrs. Norris was hanging from a wall sconce, chances are that someone put her there. Again, reinforcing the human element.”

He cocked his head for a moment. “Do you need something, Headmaster?”

Behind them, the old man appeared from under a disillusionment charm. “Good evening, Harry. How did you know I was here?”

"I could smell your lemon drops, Headmaster." Harry replied. "May I assume you were patrolling the school, and decided to check the library... or were you spying on me?"

"The former, Harry, I assure you." Dumbledore replied, both him and Harry aware that the unbreakable vow would compel him to tell the truth. "However, when I heard you discussing the situation, I felt compelled to... eavesdrop."

Harry lifted his foot, and pushed out the last free chair at the table. "Well, take a load off, then. You know more about this school than anyone, I would imagine."

Dumbledore sat down, pulling out his bag of lemon drops. "Would anyone care for a lemon drop?"

For the first time, Harry reached into the bag. "Are these the normal ones, or the ones laced with calming potion?"

"Normal." Dumbledore replied nonchalantly, before realising what Harry asked. "How did you know I lace some with calming potion?"

"A school full of emotional and angsty teenagers?" Harry snorted, popping the lemon drop into his mouth. "I would. Or sedatives."

Dumbledore popped a lemon drop into his own mouth, waiting for the others to take one. Seeing Harry take a sweet, the rest of the group followed suit, and soon all eight of them were casually sucking the sour candies. "Now, Harry, what can I do to help?"

Harry took a moment to think. "You were here fifty years ago, sir. Is the Chamber of Secrets real?"

"I... I do not know for certain, Harry." Dumbledore said after a moment. "I suspect that there is, although the school has been searched top to bottom many times over the last ten centuries. No-one has been able to locate it."

"Do you agree with my assessment that there has to be a person behind this attack?"

“Indeed. That drew my attention, and I certainly agree with your conclusion. The only problem, however, is determining who that person is. In order to command such a creature, they would need to be immensely powerful.”

“What about this ‘Heir’ comment?” Susan asked, out of the blue. “I mean, we know that Harry’s an heir. Who else?”

Neville clicked his fingers, reaching for a book on the table. “I was looking that up myself. I couldn’t really find anything. The most recent one I could find for Slytherin stopped at someone called ‘Gaunt’, at the beginning of the seventeenth century.”

Dumbledore paled slightly. “Indeed?”

Harry glanced down at his watch. “Anyway... I need to grab some sleep. Got Quidditch in the morning, and I don’t fancy trying to play without much sleep.” He looked at the Headmaster, deciding to test the old man. “If you can think of anything regarding this situation, sir, please let us know.”

“I will tell you anything I can.” Offered Dumbledore. “However, there is little concrete information or evidence available. As I said, I believe the Chamber is real, and that it has been opened before. Anything I discover, I will share with you.”

Good enough. The group stood and put their books away, before heading out of the library.

“Harry?” Neville asked after a moment.

“Yeah, mate?”

“Why are you playing Quidditch tomorrow? I thought it was the Gryffindor/Slytherin game.”

Harry nodded. “Oh, it was. But after that... unfortunate incident involving their brooms, which I still maintain I had nothing to do with, they protested loudly that they needed time to order replacements, so

the teachers voted on who should take their place. We lost, so we're playing the Gryffs tomorrow."

"Ah..."

Hermione smirked. "And will you be scaring Oliver Wood tomorrow?"

Harry's smirk was far more evil than Hermione's. "Would I really do a thing like that?"

During breakfast, Harry pondered the data dump he'd received from Luna over two months ago.

Dumbledore stood in the Great Hall, wearing dour black robes. Black banners hung from the roof, and a sombre mood permeated the air.

"We are gathered here to pay our final respects to one of our students. Harry Potter."

"It is the first time in the history of Hogwarts that a student has lost their life during a Quidditch match. Evidence shows that the Bludger which hit Harry's head was tampered with. Officers from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement will be here tomorrow. I would like every student to give them their full co-operation."

Ah, Dobby... you little bastard. Try anything, and I swear I'll give you an encounter with a Bludger you won't forget. He was grateful to his friends; thanks to Hermione, he had Quidditch armour that would stop a Bludger, and Blaise, Padma and Susan had given him the arms guards, goggles and crotch protector. I wonder if I'll keep my arm intact this time round. If I see Gilderoy Lockhart anywhere near me this time... He sighed and buttered himself some toast.

Luna watched him closely, almost able to read his mind. She stiffened, prompting Padma to flail her legs at Harry under the table. "Incoming."

"The juncture has been reached. Time will bend or break this day."

"Thanks, Luna." Harry replied. "I understand."

Hermione leaned in closer. "Is this the one?" She asked, grateful that Harry had told her about what he'd received from Luna two months ago. "The Bludger?"

"Yeah, I'd guess so." Harry replied. "Still, forewarned is forearmed, isn't it?"

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" The booming voice of Lee Jordan rang through the Quidditch stadium. "Welcome to the first Quidditch game of the season. I am your announcer, Lee Jordan! Today's match is a replacement to the traditional Gryffindor/Slytherin match which usually takes place at the beginning of the season. The reason for this is the unfortunate fault on the Slytherin teams' broomsticks. A terrible shame, from what I hear."

"Jordan!" McGonagall's voice filtered over the magical microphone.

"Sorry, Professor. Instead of Gryffindor Vs. Slytherin, we have Gryffindor Vs. Ravenclaw, a bit of a grudge match since they wiped the floor with us last time."

"Jordan!"

"Sorry, Professor. Announcing the teams, first up it's Ravenclaw, with the tried and tested Captain Roger Davies, with Cho Chang and Bradley Erickson as their Chaser Line. Their Beaters, who are not quite as good as the Gryffindor teams' -"

"Jordan!"

"Eddie Carmichael and Robert Lucas!" Lee carried on as though never interrupted. "In goals, the second best keeper in Hogwarts, Sarah Fawcett!"

"Jordan! Stop being biased!"

"Okay, Professor. And playing seeker, the youngest Quidditch player in the last century, Harry Potter!" Most of the crowd cheered,

including one slightly chubby young lad in the Gryffindor stands. An irate redhead glared at him.

“And now, the Gryffindor Lions! Captain and Keeper Oliver Wood, the best keeper in Hogwarts! A pair of unbeatable beaters, Fred and George Weasley!”

“Jordan!”

“The extremely lovely, but still rejecting me, Chaser line of Spinnet, Bell and Johnson!”

“Behave, Jordan!”

“And finally, at Seeker, Cormac McLaggen.” His voice trailed off as he announced the Gryffindor seeker, proof of how utterly ineffectual he found the third year to be.

“And Madam Hooch is at the centre now, as both captains shake hands. And what’s Potter doing? Did he just wink at Wood? Something you’re not telling us Harry? No, sorry, I don’t swing that way, so there’s no point in making that gesture at me.”

“Jordan, for the love of Merlin, will-”

“And they’re off!”

The game began as usual. The Ravenclaw team raced forward, managing to snatch the Quaffle from Alicia Spinnet, thanks to Harry flying with his distraction moves. As the Chaser line moved towards the Gryffindor end, Harry made a long sweeping circuit around the pitch.

He heard the Bludger begin its attack, and decided to play for a while. His Nimbus 2000, no longer the best broom on the market, was still up there in the top three. With a burst of speed, he raced round the Gryffindor goalposts, sticking out his foot to snag the pole on the way past. In effect, he performed a handbrake turn, accelerating down the pitch to his broom’s top speed of 135mph. By summoning up his

magic and lacing it throughout his broom, he managed to get another 11mph, making him the fastest player on the pitch.

Fortunately, the Bludgers only had a top speed of 80mph, even when punted by the horrifically strong and accurate arm of a Weasley. This won't be too bad. As long as I can keep the damned thing on my tail, I should be okay. He swooped under Katie Bell, noting the Bludger neatly duck under her as it followed him. Let's have a little fun with it. Harry began to fly completely randomly, moving in and out of players, round the stands, and even through the supports of the stands.

Winding round, Harry raced up to Eddie Carmichael, who'd just punted the non-tampered Bludger at Angelina. "Hey, Eddie!" Harry shouted as he shot past. "Get rid of this bloody thing, will you?"

Eddie glanced over, seeing the Bludger racing towards him. He span his broom round, drawing back his arm. With a grunt, he slammed the bat into the iron ball, sending it cannoning away. "That do you, Potter?"

"Cheers, Eddie." Harry kept his broom floating alongside the older boy's for a moment.

"That's not right..." Eddie muttered, as he saw the Bludger loop round, heading back towards them. "Back up, Potter. Little thing's just being annoying..." Eddie reached down, pulling all his strength up for another punt. The Bludger slammed into the bat, to be knocked away, before performing a U-turn. "Potter, go! I'll chase this!"

Harry nodded, before sending his broom forwards, accelerating to top speed almost instantly. He raced towards the other Bludger, noting that it was sailing straight towards him. I wonder... As soon as the Bludger was in range, he performed a sloth grip roll, the iron menace passing over him. To his shock, the rogue neatly rose up over it's companion, still chasing Harry.

Hmm... this is gonna be... difficult. Harry straightened his broom, and began a Wronski, hoping he could persuade the ball to bury itself in the ground.

Eddie floated over to his Captain. "Rog, that Bludger's been tampered with!"

Roger spotted Harry performing his faint, noting that McLaggen was following him down. Less than two feet from the ground, Harry pulled up his broom, the Bludger neatly following him, while Cormac decorated the field.

"Time out!" He called out to Hooch. With a blow on her whistle, Hooch stopped the game, prompting the two Bludgers to stop in mid-air.

The team quickly assembled. "What's going on, Potter?" He demanded.

"I'm being stalked by a rabid Bludger?" Harry replied. "Seems to want me. Not entirely certain why."

"Are you saying it's been tampered with?"

Harry looked at him incredulously. "You're supposed to be a Ravenclaw, Roger! Do you really think a Bludger would lust after me like this if it hadn't been tampered with?"

"If we call for an investigation, we forfeit the game." Cho said, glaring lightly at Harry. "If Potter can't handle it..."

"Back off." Harry replied. "I'd like to see you handle it." He turned back to Roger. "Keep playing. I'll deal with the little bugger myself." Without bothering to wait for a response, Harry shot off, keeping his eye on the rogue.

In the stands, Hermione was watching her boyfriend perform stunts that no sane man should ever try. "That's not right... Guess today really is the day..." She muttered as she watched the Bludger try and murder Harry. "Luna, can you tell us anything?"

She pondered for a moment. "A duck's quack does not echo."

"Anything relevant to the game?" Hermione shot back, exasperated.

Luna looked over at Harry, who was running his broom flat out. "He can do this, Hermione. Have faith in Harry, and he will win."

Go, Harry... be safe.

Harry continued his mad dash around the pitch, noticing that the Bludger was now able to keep pace with him. This should not be possible. Bludgers top speed is only 80... how the hell is it matching my broom? Dobby, I swear I'm gonna rip your little nuts off for this! Harry continued to circle, ducking and diving. At this rate, I can't catch the pissing snitch... At least it's only Cormac. I doubt he'd see it, even if it was hovering six inches in front of his nose. He started another Wronski, before changing his mind and performing a sudden vertical climb, pushing the broom for it's maximum performance.

Oh, I hope this works... Once he got to about a thousand feet, he levelled off, no longer looking for the snitch, but trying to keep himself alive. He spotted the Bludger approaching. With a quick gulp, he willed the broom to cut all it's power, allowing himself to begin a free fall. Without any aerodynamic life, he began tumbling about like a leaf in a storm. He approached the ground rapidly, noticing the Bludger heading straight for him at full speed. A second from impact, he re-engaged the broom, shooting straight forward and climbing.

The Bludger planted itself in the ground with a dull thud. Yes! Have it! Harry's celebration was cut short at the rogue yanked itself free and maintain it's pursuit.

By this time, the rogue Bludger had gained everyone's attention, prompting the crowd to subside into a kind of shocked silence.

Right, fuck this. Harry stopped his crazy manoeuvring, and headed from the Bludger, full speed. He gripped the handle tightly as he hiked up his legs, squatting on the broom before shakily standing up. The Bludger altered it's course slightly, heading straight for Harry's head. And this is where the story ends... Harry thought. As soon as the Bludger was close enough, Harry jumped up, somersaulting over the rogue. His broom continued flying, slowing as it approached the boundaries of the field.

Okay, the broom's safe... and I'm three hundred feet in the air... Harry wandlessly cast a low-powered Leviosa on the soles of his shoes, lowering himself to the ground, while summoning two beater's bats. Fred Weasley and Robert Lucas both protested as the bats flew out of their hands, landing neatly in Harry's.

As soon as he hit the ground, Harry infused the bats with a sizable portion of his own magic, making them glow a bright green. Come on... He tracked the Bludger which was racing for him. Come on... come to poppa, you little son of a bitch... He reared back, focussing his strength, before slamming the infused bat forward, causing the Bludger to... explode. A piece of shrapnel slammed into his chest, fortunately protected by his armour.

Dropping the bat in his left hand to the ground, he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled, while summoning the broom back to him.

Absolute silence reigned throughout the stadium as Harry stuffed the beater bats under his arms, remounted his broom and shot into the sky, passing a bat to Robert and the other to Fred, before shooting past McLaggen, grabbing the snitch from the sky.

"Potter destroys a Bludger, unprecedented in Hogwarts' history. Oh, and Ravenclaw wins." Lee deadpanned.

In the background, Harry could almost feel Dobby's annoyance and desperation. Don't try it again, dipshit. Any further thoughts were cut off as a bushy-haired missile tackled him, pushing him to the ground. Ah... things could be worse.

"Come on!" Hermione ordered bossily. "Straight to the hospital wing with you! Don't know what you were playing at..."

Escaping from the madwoman's clutches was relatively simple this time. Harry simply proved to the evil Queen of Medicine that he wasn't hurt, bleeding, broken or otherwise incapacitated. To his immense surprise, he was pulled into an intense hug, then given a stern poke in the arm for worrying her. He escaped after promising that he'd never explode a Bludger again, then retreated.

Once back in the common room, Harry racked his brain, trying to remember what was to come next. He knew that Colin Creevey was the next person to be petrified, then had a totally inappropriate thought. Little shit never did bring me those pictures he took. Hmm... there's an excuse to go and find him.

Hauling himself to his feet, he headed for the exit, leaving the rest of his friends behind. Ah, the things I must do...

Heading up to the seventh floor, he near-squealed when he found himself dragged into an empty classroom. His wand was in hand, and a stunner lit the tip, before he recognised his 'abductor'.

"Harry Potter should not have returned to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!" The little voice complained.

"Can it, Dobby!" Harry snapped. "You nearly killed me, you little shit!"

"Not kill you, sir. Never kill you! Dobby just wanted to make sure you went home!"

"A Bludger to the head will splat it all over the damned field, Dobby! I'd have been sent home in a pissing box! Never do anything like that again, or I swear to Merlin, I'll rip your head off and spit you're your bloody neck!"

The elf sighed, before hauling himself onto a chair. "Dobby is used to death threats, sir. Dobby receives them five times a day at home."

"Yeah? Well, Lucius Malfoy's a wanker, Dobby."

Dobby looked up, his eyes wide. "H-Harry Potter knows Dobby's family?"

"Yes, Dobby. I also know that Lucius Malfoy slipped a dark artefact into Ginny Weasley's cauldron back in August, and is attempting to return Voldemort to power."

"S-Sir is a great and powerful wizard!" The elf exclaimed dramatically.

“Save it, Dobby.” Harry replied, tired. “I’m really not in the mood. Now, this plan of Malfoy’s must be stopped, yes? Do you agree?”

Dobby nodded, before squealing and trying to bash his head against the back of the chair. Harry grabbed him by his pillow case, dangling in the air until he stopped trying to beat himself.

“So, Dobby, tell me this; how the hell am I supposed to destroy Voldemort’s Horcrux if you’ve put me in the hospital wing or the morgue? Hmm?”

“Dobby must help keep Harry Potter safe!”

“No! Dobby, I order you to leave me alone, or I will have to put you down, do you understand! I will stop Malfoy. Try and free you, if possible, but I won’t tolerate any more interference.”

Dobby sighed dramatically. “Dobby understands, Harry Potter sir. Dobby will stay away.”

“Good.” Harry dropped Dobby lightly onto the chair. “Now, go back, and keep a low profile, Dobby. I’ll be in touch.”

Without waiting for a reply, Harry stalked out of the room, heading for Gryffindor tower.

Oh, bugger!

Was Harry’s thought as he got onto the seventh floor. Lying in the corridor was a clearly petrified Colin Creevey, clutching his camera to his chest. I just know I’m gonna be blamed for this.

His prediction was accurate as Snape came stalking onto the corridor, Argus Filch hot on his heels.

And the day gets better and better...

“Potter!” Snape sneered widely. “What’s this? Attacking students now, are we?”

"I know I'm good looking, Snape, but there's no need to be following me around, is there?" Harry returned Snape's sneer with interest, standing against the wall, his arms folded across his chest. "So, you gonna try and blame me for this?"

"Oh, I don't need to." Snape replied, a sick glee on his face. "You found, stood over the poor boy is all the proof I need."

"Really, Severus?" The voice of Albus Dumbledore filtered over the hallway. Behind him was Professor McGonagall, looking down at Colin with a fretful expression. "So, an accusation is synonymous with guilt now, is it?"

"Headmaster, what more proof do we need?" Snape asked, in what he thought was undoubtedly a reasonable tone. "Potter here is clearly guilty of attacking poor Mr. Creevey."

Harry, without being asked, handed over his wand. Dumbledore performed his now-standard Priori Incantatum, watching as routine classwork spells came out of the end.

"Enough of this petty grudge, Severus. Unless Mr. Potter is capable of ridiculously powerful wandless magic, or has a second wand, I will hear no more about it."

Well, I am capable of ridiculously powerful wandless magic... although, I'll never tell you about it. Harry maintained an innocent expression while looking at Dumbledore, then winking rakishly at Snape. The man turned puce, before turning back to Dumbledore.

"This is the second incident with Potter being involved, Headmaster. Do you not think this warrants investigation?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I have investigated, Severus. I have checked Mr. Potter's wand, and it clearly shows, as it did after the first attack, that he cast no spells that could cause this kind of injury."

"Perhaps." Snape conceded. "However, how do we know that Mr. Potter does not have a second wand?"

“Oh, for the love of Merlin, give it a rest!” Harry snapped. “I did not petrify Creevey, or the demon cat. The fact that I was the one to find them is coincidence, nothing more. Now, leave me alone!” He turned back to Dumbledore. “Sir, do you have any idea what this could be?”

McGonagall spoke up. “He still has his camera, Albus. Perhaps he managed to take a picture of his attacker.”

Dumbledore nodded, pulling the camera from Colin’s hand, and opening the back. A hiss of smoke, not to mention the rotten smell of burning plastic, assaulted the corridor. McGonagall watched the film flash into smoke, before looking at the headmaster.

“What could do this to magical film, Albus? It’s nearly indestructible.” She glanced down at the camera. “What does it mean?”

“It means...” Dumbledore sighed heavily. “It means that the Chamber of Secrets has indeed been opened, Minerva.”

We already knew that. Harry thought. “Sir? May I be dismissed?”

“Hmm?” Dumbledore looked up. “Ah, yes, Harry. Please, return to your common room.”

The days following that were some of the most uncomfortable Harry had experienced during his second run-through of his Hogwarts days. Someone (Snape, obviously) had revealed that Harry had been seen standing over poor defenceless Colin Creevey when he was attacked.

Harry had immediately told his friends what had happened, then retreated into his Portkey Box, officially working on upgrades and new systems, but in reality, he was hiding. He was... unaccustomed to dealing with this many hostile stares. It seemed Snape and Malfoy had really been riling up the students, prompting sneers and nastiness. And it’s only gonna get worse... He mused sadly, poring over the Marauder’s Map.

Three weeks after the incident, Harry was slumped in armchair in the common room, idly leafing through ‘Casino Royale’ while Hedwig was

reading intently over his shoulder; she hadn't read this one before, and knew that her human pet had enjoyed it.

"Hey, Harry, look!" Harry looked over at Hermione, who was pointing over at the notice board, a gleaming new sign written in lilac ink taking pride of place. "There's going to be a duelling club. It's tonight in the Great Hall."

"Wonder who they've got to teach it?"

Hermione shrugged. "Well, Flitwick was a five-time duelling champion when he was younger, so it could be him."

"I'd love to learn from him." Padma smiled as she flopped on the couch near Harry's chair, Hedwig sparing her a glance before going back to the book. "Good book, Hedwig?"

She snuffled appreciatively before going back to reading.

"Harry, you want to tell me why your owl is reading a book?"

Harry didn't even bother to look up. "Because the movie stars David Niven, and it's crap. It makes no sense, the plot's pretty complex and doesn't survive the screen, and it..." He shrugged. "Trust me, the book's better."

"Allow me to rephrase, then. Why is your owl reading? Owls don't read."

Hedwig barked suddenly, the rebuke clear.

"Okay, I guess they do read." Padma leaned in to Hermione, whispering in the brunette's ear. "Are we sure she's an owl?"

"Honestly? No. But don't voice it too loud, she knows... things."

Harry saw the two girls whispering, knowing that they were talking about Hedwig and her abilities. "Well, shall we go and have dinner? We can then go to the duelling club."

Harry and his group of friends were watching the Great Hall, teeming with students, all of them looking forward to duelling lessons, maybe from Flitwick, and possibly from Dumbledore, one of the greatest wizards in the history of the school. The students were all going to be disappointed when they found out that the club would be run by...

"Me, Gilderoy Lockhart! Can everybody hear me? Can everybody see me?"

In those robes? Merlin, they'd be lucky to miss you. "Hey, Hermione, I think I'm going to go back to the Common room. If this git's teaching, then I'm out of here. There's nothing this ponce knows that I want to learn." Harry headed for the door, only to be spotted by Lockhart, who immediately called him.

"Ah, Harry, good to see you here, although I'm fairly certain that you know a little bit about defence." Lockhart suddenly smiled. "You can watch myself and my assistant during the first duel, then perform a demonstration duel for us!"

Ooh, such a tempting offer! Harry thought, then cheered up a little. And it's a chance to hex Snape... hmm, decisions, decisions... He nodded slowly, knowing this had to happen in order to keep the timeline relatively intact. 'Relative' being the operative word.

Lockhart pranced up onto the duelling platform, his robes making most people wince from the sheer luridness. "You all know my assistant, Professor Snape!"

A few of the Slytherins gave a half-hearted clap, while the rest of the students remained studiously silent. Snape mounted the platform, his face its customary sneer.

"Don't worry. You'll still have your Potions Master when I've finished with him." Lockhart proclaimed loudly.

"Yeah, but will Snape leave anything of Lockhart apart from a greasy spot on the floor?" Harry whispered to Hermione, who giggled quietly, before passing on the comment to Susan and Padma.

“Now, we duel!” Lockhart proclaimed, brandishing his wand at Snape, who’d already loudly intoned “Expelliarmus!” Lockhart flew backwards, his wand flying out of his hand, but to the surprise of all, Snape also flew backwards, crashing into Millicent Bultstrode and Theodore Nott. No-one noticed Harry’s hand twitch.

Lockhart pulled himself back up to his feet, looking over at the slumped Snape with astonishment, then a kind of sick pride. Harry could almost see the fop thinking ‘I did that?’. He decided not to disabuse him of the notion.

“As you can see, we both used the Disarming charm, ‘Expelliarmus’. That’s why our wands flew out of our hands.” He took his wand back from a heavily-blushing Lavender Brown, before remounting the stage, and turning back to the audience. “Professor Snape, can you think of a suitable opponent for young Mr. Potter’s demonstration duel?”

Snape sneered. “I’d be more than happy to duel Mr. Potter.”

Lockhart laughed nervously. “I rather think that you might be too much for a student, Professor. Perhaps one of your students?”

“Malfoy!” The greasy man gestured, and Malfoy, smirking mightily, got up on the duelling platform, his wand held loosely in his hand.

“Scared, Potter?”

Harry, as soon as Draco had decided to challenge him, had moved up to the duelling platform. He had very little time for the Slytherin; he was ineffectual as an opponent, and there was little point in getting upset as his usual diatribe, but the chance to hex him without punishment? Far too much fun to ignore.

“Yes.” Harry deadpanned. “Absolutely terrified. Look, you can see my hand shaking.” He raised his left hand, wiggling it about comically. “I may even have soiled myself.” He paused for a moment. “How’re you doing with that, by the way? The itching gone?”

Malfoy's face turned puce, a truly unattractive colour considering his pale complexion and almost-white hair.

Lockhart was standing in the middle of the platform, announcing to the crowd and combatants. "The duel is to disarm only. After the count of three. Good luck, gentlemen." Snape was furiously whispering in to Draco's ear, probably trying to teach the half-squib a spell quickly.

"One."

Harry raised his wand in a salute, while Draco scowled.

"Two."

Draco's wand was already moving, while he shouted out "Serpensortia!"

A large brown cobra erupted from the end of the wand, landing in a heap in the middle of the platform, hissing angrily as it hit the ground. It immediately began to read up, opening its hood, hissing angrily. Its eyes focussed on Justin Finch-Fletchley, and started to slither its way towards him.

Harry gritted his teeth for a moment, not eager to go through the prejudice the students heaped on him the first time around. Bollocks to it.

§Leave him.§

Everyone, including the snake, turned towards him, looks of horror on their faces.

"Justin, take one step backwards." Harry spoke calmly, but firmly, prompting the Hufflepuff to take one step backwards. His movement caught the snake's attention, raising itself up.

§Do not move!§ Harry commanded, making the snake pause for a moment. "Justin, one more step back. Slow and steady." The terrified lad took another smooth step backwards.

§Let me eat him.§ The snake hissed, looking up at Harry.

§No. You will stand down.§ Harry shook his head. “Justin, two steps back. Again, slow and easy.”

Justin took a step back, then another.

§Come with me.§ Harry commanded, taking a step forward. “Justin, three steps back. You should be okay, now.” He didn’t both to watch. §Stand down.§ The snake pulled in it’s hood, lowered it’s head, and started moving towards Harry, who knelt down, extending his non-wand hand towards the snake. §Climb up. I shall take you to a forest, where you can find food and shelter.§

§Thank you, Speaker.§

Harry picked up the snake, letting the fearsome creature wrap itself around Harry’s arm, resting it’s head on Harry’s shoulder. He turned to his opponent. “You know, Malfoy, I’m not sure how things happen in your house, or what kind of utterly crap education you’ve had, but in the rest of the world, three comes after two. And when someone says ‘on three’, they mean that you wait until you’ve heard the three before casting your spell.

“I also don’t know if you’re aware, but the charm is pronounced Ex-Pell-E-Ar-Muss. Not quite sure why you thought it began with an ‘S’, but that’s okay.” Harry smiled magnanimously at the confused student, before turning to his most hated teacher. “Professor Snape, I’m most curious as to why you’re teaching Dark and potentially fatal spells to second-year students. Something to ask Professor Dumbledore, I’m sure.”

The cobra watched comfortably from Harry’s arm as he moved through the crowd towards Hermione, who was watching everyone scatter away from Harry like roaches, apart from his friends.

“Harry, what’s going on?”

“You’re a Parselmouth?” Neville looked, not afraid, but surprised. “I was taught that all Parselmouths are Dark wizards. Guess that’s another thing the books are wrong about.” Harry felt a rush of gratitude towards Neville for that statement.

“What’s a Parselmouth?” Hermione looked upset; Harry realised that there was something which, looking at the rest of the students in the Hall, was important, and she didn’t know what it was.

“A Parselmouth is somebody who can speak to snakes and, to a lesser extent, other reptiles, like dragons and lizards. The skill is considered very Dark.” Blaise looked at the snake appraisingly for a moment. “Ovophis Monticola. Beautiful.” He stroked a finger over the cobra’s head, which appeared to enjoy the attention. “And, if memory serves, quite deadly.”

“Possibly. I think a trip down to the Forbidden Forest might be in order. I think my friend here would like the Forest rather than a dorm room.”

“But why is being a Parselmouth considered Dark?” Hermione asked, not sure why this sort of thing was so terrifying to the students.

Neville took this one. “Some of the Darkest magic around requires snakes, either bits of them as ingredients, or the willing co-operation of a snake, which only a Parselmouth can get. You-Know-Who was the last Parselmouth around, and he used snakes to do some truly evil things.” Neville suddenly blanched. “Oh, bugger.”

“What is it?” Susan, who was actually playing peek-a-boo with a poisonous snake, suddenly looked at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Slytherin was a Parselmouth. They called him Serpent-Tongue.” He gestured towards the badge of Blaise’s robe. “That’s why the symbol of Slytherin House is a snake. Remember what Binns said in History class? The Chamber of Secrets holds a monster that Slytherin’s heir can control, to eliminate all those who aren’t worthy out of the school. Harry can portkey through the wards of the school, something only a Founder’s heir can do. Everyone’s going to believe that Harry Potter, ‘Boy-Who-Lived’, is the heir of Slytherin, and a future Dark Lord.”

"I'm in trouble." Harry said, a wry smile on his face. "Must be Tuesday."

As Harry walked in to the Great Hall the next morning, he saw the entire room suddenly quieten down, staring at him as if they expected him to start his campaign of torture and murder right there and then, summoning snakes to do his evil bidding.

§Good morning, everyone. How are we all today?§ One of the fourth year Hufflepuff's shrieked, and hugged the boy next to her, crying about how she didn't want her parents to die at Harry's hands.

"Merlin, people, get over yourselves. Je parle Francais, aussi." He saw people looking at him confusedly. "I speak French, too. Does that mean that all of a sudden, you should fear me because I speak the language of France?"

He sat down at the Ravenclaw table, watching people scurrying away from him. "Hey, Justin." The boy turned in his seat, looking at Harry intently. "You were about to be bitten by a poisonous cobra yesterday. Did it bite you?"

"No."

"And you know why? Because I told it not to. I told it to come to me, and I would take it to the forest, which I did last night. You're all safe, because of me."

"You're a Dark wizard, Potter. You should be in Azkaban!" Harry rolled his eyes as he heard Ron Weasley's voice behind him.

"You know, Weasley, I've worked out how you're as thin as you are, despite how much you eat; all that jumping to conclusions and flying off the handle must be pretty tiring."

"Sod off, Potter. You're a Dark wizard. I bet you're the Heir of Slytherin. Going to kill off all of the Mudbloods in the school?"

Ron suddenly flinched as something hit him on the cheek, quite close to his eye. Harry smiled as he saw Blaise wrap another elastic band round his finger, ready for another shot. Unfortunately, everyone around him appeared to be murmuring about the same thing; Harry Potter must be the Heir of Slytherin, and he should be in Azkaban.

“Have none of you bloody looked up the Heir of Slytherin?” Harry asked incredulously.

Several students muttered in the negative.

“Well, here’s a plan for you, then.” Harry announced. “Why don’t you go and bloody well look it up in the library? For people like Ron Weasley who are so thick it’s untrue, that’s the room on the third floor with all the pretty books in it. I’ll accept your apologies when you come back.”

“It’s you!” Ron snapped loudly.

Harry ignored the redhead, and whispered something to Hermione. Her eyes opened widely. “Really?” She, in turn, whispered to Neville, Susan, Padma and Blaise. Luna just smiled, indicating she already knew.

“Do you know who it is, Potter?” One of the Hufflepuffs shouted.

“Yep.” Harry replied casually. “But I’m not telling you. Go and look it up.” He ignored the clamouring and slumped down at the Ravenclaw table, noting that the students quickly moved out of the way. He was glad that his six core friends were standing by him. In the original timeline, only Hermione had stuck with him steadfast, with Ron being a little distant, since he hated Slytherins with a fiery passion.

As if on cue, Hermione leaned closer to him. “We know the truth, Harry. That’s all that matters.” She squeezed his hand, before reaching for the coffee pot.

“Well, I must say, Harry, when you surprise people, you do it in a most spectacular fashion.”

"Thank you, sir. I do aim to please." Harry was sat in Dumbledore's office, Professors Snape, Flitwick and McGonagall also in chairs around the office. "I have to be honest, though, sir. I'm wondering why Snape taught Malfoy a spell to summon a snake. At what point could that be considered the disarming hex?"

"I did not teach that charm to Mr. Malfoy. I do not know where he could've learnt it."

"Why don't you put your hand on your wand and swear that on your magic, Snape? I'd love to see you turn in to a squib."

"Mr. Potter! Please refrain yourself." Dumbledore turned towards Snape. "Well, Severus? You were seen talking to a student moments before he cast a hex that is not taught at this institution, one that could've and, for all you knew, would've severely injured or killed Mr. Potter, a student we all know that you despise and have a grudge against. Do you have any way of proving that you did not teach Mr. Malfoy that hex?"

Snape just sat there, saying nothing.

"Very well. I am deducting 100 points from Slytherin for Mr. Malfoy's hex, which could've been fatal. I am also putting you on probation, Severus. I've been willing to tolerate your personal foibles, but this is beyond the pale. Any other action against Mr. Potter, and your fate shall be decided by Filius." Flitwick looked up, gleeful at the prospect of facing Severus at the end of his wand. "Any questions?"

Snape shook his head, stunned at what had happened to him. Ever since Potter arrived at this school, I've been persecuted by the faculty. That boy needs to be taken down a peg. "I shall follow your directions, Headmaster. May I leave?"

Dumbledore nodded, and Snape left the room. "Albus, he's getting worse. We could easily have seen a student in the hospital wing, or even a student death." McGonagall was getting in to her stride. "I would recommend that Severus be at least suspended and a full review of his years here be started immediately."

"I trust Severus Snape, Minerva. It just appears that he has a bit of a blind spot with young Potter. Severus needs to be here teaching." He saw his deputy eye him with disdain in her eye. "Do not worry yourself, old friend. I am keeping an eye on him. With me in this school, nothing bad will happen to Harry Potter."

Harry almost laughed at the statement. If there's ever a way to cause a problem, that's it. It's like saying "Hey, watch this!" or "What could possibly go wrong?" I'm so screwed, it's not even funny.

Harry wandered in to the Great Hall for dinner that evening, having gone through a very routine set of classes for the day. As he sat down, he could hear students muttering about him being the evil Slytherin trying to destroy the school.

"Right, that's it!" Harry stood up on the bench, looking around the Hall. "Okay, who here went to the Library and looked up at the Slytherin Genealogy?"

Silence.

"And yet, you all have the nerve to accuse me of being the bloody Heir." Harry snapped. "I have looked it up, and I do know who the Heir of Slytherin is." This garnered the attention of the vast majority of the Great Hall. "In the Genealogy section of the Library it talks about the old familial lines." He gazed down at them. "I'll give you a hint. Being a Parselmouth is a trait that is only seen in the Slytherin line. However, this... gift... is not native to the Potter line."

Hermione's brain, probably the fastest in school, worked it out first. "Your scar." She whispered.

Harry clicked his fingers as his hand shot out to Hermione. "There it is." He smiled warmly at her. "My scar gives me my ability to speak Parseltongue."

Percy Weasley stood up. "You mean... the Heir of Slytherin is... You-Know-Who?"

Harry actually growled on the stage. Through clenched teeth, he spat out a response. "No, Percy, I don't know who you're talking about."

"He means He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, Potter!" One of the Hufflepuff prefects shouted.

Harry theatrically turned to Dumbledore. "Sir?"

"Yes, Harry?" Dumbledore looked down at one of his 'favourite' students with a twinkle in his eye.

"Do you know who they're talking about?"

Dumbledore pretended to think for a moment. "I do believe they're talking about Lord Voldemort, Harry."

"Ah. Voldemort. Indeed." Harry ignored the pathetic little yelps from the rest of the student body. "Yes. Voldemort is the Heir of Slytherin. I am not." He thought for a moment. "However..." This dragged everyone's attention back to the present. "I suppose... thinking about it... I could be classed as the Heir to the magic of Slytherin... by the Ancient Rites of Combat... since I destroyed Voldemort's body back in '81..."

"That's not true, Harry." Dumbledore spoke up loudly. "In order for you to become the Heir by Combat, you would have needed to kill Voldemort."

"Oh." Harry said, looking back at Dumbledore. "You mean... he's not dead yet?" He winked at Dumbledore.

"No. At the moment, he is banished... existing as nothing more than a spirit... mist in the wind. Until he dies, you cannot be the Heir."

"Oh." Harry sounded oddly disappointed, before he turned around to face the students of the school. "So, you've just heard from Professor Dumbledore, probably the greatest wizard in the world, that I cannot be the Heir of Slytherin." He smiled warmly at the school, which was quickly replaced by a mask of cold anger. "So, if you could all stop

pointing, whispering, sniggering and generally being offensive towards me, I'd appreciate it."

"But, what about your ability to speak Parseltongue?" Ron Weasley shouted from the Gryffindor table. "Doesn't that prove you're a dark wizard?"

Harry just glared at him. "Were you even listening to me, Weasley?" He snapped. "I just told you that the Parseltongue ability was passed to me during Voldemort's failed killing curse eleven years ago. How can that make me a dark wizard?"

Ron Weasley, never the sharpest crayon in the box, shouted what he thought was the perfect response. "Because you speak Parseltongue!"

Fred and George took that moment to launch a full broadside of Bread Rolls at their little brother, pelting him with the hardest ones they could find, until he finally shut up.

Author's Note: by popular request and demand, a tribute to a truly funny writer, who's been keeping us all in suspense for weeks: "Somewhere in the world, two aardvarks are humping.". Here's to ya', Kafka! (Update!)

– CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE –

Modifying Misguided Morality

As Harry drifted off to sleep, a conference was started between of a group of people who didn't exist on the bridge of a vessel that wasn't there.

Why is it every time I chew something over in my mind, this lot turn up? Harry pondered, as he found himself on the bridge of his mindscape.

"Because it makes things easier." Tactical replied. "What better way to thrash out an argument than to actually thrash it out? If you want, we can get the Counsellor in here to be beaten up."

Harry grinned. "As much fun as that would be, I think we'll be needing him."

As if on cue, the Counsellor walked on the bridge, his hot-pink jumpsuit blinding. He stopped when he saw Harry and Tactical staring at him. "I'm not gonna get beaten again, am I?"

"Depends on how fast you can run. It's looking like a good bet, though." Tactical replied, cracking his knuckles. "But not now. It seems our leader here," he pointed to Harry, "wants to have a chat about something."

"Ah... should I call for everyone?" The Counsellor asked.

"That won't be necessary." Harry replied. "But lately... I've been pondering things."

"We know." Tactical and the Counsellor replied in unison. "We're part of you, remember?"

I'm such a smart-arse sometimes... Harry thought to himself. "Okay... so, tell me."

“Just recently, you’ve been coming to the conclusion that you’ve been acting like Dumbledore.” The Counsellor said, brusquely. “You’ve allowed things to happen that you could have easily prevented, all in the name of ‘the Greater Good’, something that annoys the living piss out of you when it happens to us.”

“True.” Harry admitted.

“Right now, you’re thinking about radically changing things, so that people aren’t affected. Stopping Ginny from using the diary would be a very good deed, even though it’ll rob us of using the Basilisk parts.”

“It did have an impact on her. Not using the diary, which we all know she doesn’t remember, but the whole ‘saving her from an evil basilisk’ thing.” Harry advised. “It was one of the reasons that she became that obsessed fan-girl. I have the power to stop it. But-”

“You’re worried about changing the time-line.” Tactical interrupted. “We understand, but things have changed from the first run through already. When we first got here, we said that we’d keep the time-line intact. Since then, we’ve bugged it up royally, haven’t we?”

“Only little changes...” Harry tried to defend.

“‘Little changes’? ‘Little’? Good gods, we changed everything!” The Counsellor proclaimed shrilly. “It only takes a single pebble to start an avalanche! Where the hell do I start? We left the Dursleys, which changed the Dobby situation, we moved into Diagon Alley, we got emancipated, we met Hermione far earlier, we corrupted her into a choco-fiend on the Express, we ignored Ron Weasley, we defeated the Troll differently... need I continue?”

Tactical smoothly carried on the diatribe. “What about the longer-lasting differences we’ve made? Susan, Padma and Blaise were never friends in the original time-line. Acquaintances, yes, but never friends. I’m not even going to begin to touch on the ship. And Percy Weasley? That compulsion will change his entire future!”

“And all for the ‘Greater Good’.” Harry concluded sadly. “Sweet Jesus, I’m as bad as Dumbledore...”

"Hang on, Angst-man." The Counsellor said. "You've not sacrificed anyone, or royally screwed people over. You've interfered. The only manipulation you've made is Percy, really. You could explain it to him, or simply remove the compulsion. It's not been on him long enough to become long-term."

Harry nodded. "I had such good intentions... but, then again, the 'Road to hell...'"

"You also need to send a letter to Padfoot." Tactical advised. "Explain that you know he's innocent, but you don't have enough physical evidence to prove his innocence. You know that Fudge will block any attempts to get a trial. He may have to go on the run."

"I... I could explain, using general terms." Harry offered. "You know, explain that I have knowledge about the future since I have access to a seer. That's not a lie."

The Counsellor smiled, and rested a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Do the right thing, Harry. That's all we can do." The hand suddenly shot away as the Counsellor left the bridge at a dead run, Tactical chasing after him with what looked suspiciously like a pool cue...

Harry woke up, refreshed after an hour and a half's sleep, a new spring in his step. Okay... time to get things done right. First up, a letter to Padfoot.

Dear Padfoot

First of all, I must apologise to you, for my conduct over the last year. The reason I'm apologising will become clear as you read through this missive.

I'm really not sure how to go about writing this. There are so many things I need to tell you... but they're the kind of things you can't really write in a letter. Sometimes, you have to say it in person.

First of all, allow me to reiterate something I said to you a year ago: I know that you are not guilty of the crimes that you have been

imprisoned for. You were not the Potters' Secret-Keeper, Peter Pettigrew was. You did not blow up that street back in '81, again, that was Pettigrew. I know this, and you know this.

However, I cannot prove that you are innocent at the present time, and therein lies my problem. Now, you and I both know that by using your Animagus form, you can protect yourself from the Dementors, since they work by sensing emotions, and Padfoot's emotions are more primal than Sirius'. Since you've been poorly fed over the last decade, Padfoot's very thin. You could escape by squeezing through the bars of your cell, or wait until the Dementors deliver your food, and then swim back to the mainland.

While this would be a very useful thing to do, you will be hunted, sparking the biggest international manhunt in the history of the Magical world.

The information that I can share with you at the present time is limited, but I can tell you this: Lord Voldemort will return, within the next few years. His Death Eaters will return to him, and the Blood War will start. When that time comes, you will be needed, Padfoot. Not to fight, but to act as a moral compass for Harry and Moony. The essence of the Marauder still exists. The spirit's gone, the comic relief's a traitor, but the brain still lives in Moony, while the Marauders' Heart still beats in your chest. Young Harry has the potential to join your ranks.

As to how I know this? One of my companions is a Seer, and I'm no slouch myself. You'll be needed to help keep Harry's spirits up. After all, who can resist a Marauder (OK, apart from Lily in 4th year, but James had snuck a dungbomb in your drawers, and charmed it so that you couldn't smell it. Evil? Yes. Brilliant? Absolutely!)?

There is a sequence of events that I've been following. We know that you'll escape at the right time, and that's important. The right time won't be for several months, though.

And this brings me to my dilemma: I want you out of prison... but it'll affect our plans, and could be very costly. This, however, should not be a factor in your decision. We both know that you could walk out of the door at this very minute, and it has to be your choice.

If you escape from Azkaban, it'll start the manhunt, which could drive the servants of Voldemort into action before we are ready. Unlike Dumbledore, though, I'm not prepared to say "it's for the Greater Good, Sirius, that you stay there." It has to be your choice.

If you agree to stay in Azkaban (and I know it's a thoroughly unpleasant place; I've been there myself, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone... except Death Eaters and Voldemort) I will continue to send you food and clothing. If you decide to break out and go on the run... I will continue to send you food and clothing.

If you're willing to stay, (and I know that I seem to be pushing that, I'm not, honestly. It's YOUR CHOICE) then when Minister Fudge does his next prison inspection (late June or early July, I think) he will stop by your door. Ask him if you can have his copy of the Daily Prophet. Tell him you miss doing the crossword. When he gives it to you, there'll be an EXTREMELY interesting picture on the front page. When you see that picture, Sirius, it's time to go. Whatever you do, however, don't react to the picture in front of Fudge. He'll make things... difficult for us all.

If you do decide to leave Azkaban, make certain that you aren't seen. Fudge will send the entire Dementor force after you.

I do, however, have one order for you, though I don't think you'll mind it: TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.

Stripeclaw

Harry read the finished note, and nodded to himself. What he'd written warned Sirius about the article, told him about the possibility of escape, but also told him the best time to escape. However, he'd put in a good warning about escaping too soon. I hope it's enough, Sirius.

He got out of bed, showered and dressed, and headed for the kitchens. Fortunately, it was still dark out, and the human residents of the castle, as well as the portraits, were still sleeping soundly. The basket of food, with a strapped on note, quickly vanished.

Padfoot woke up, growling lightly, as something materialised in his cell. His canine nose quickly detected the wonderful scent of chicken, prompting him to turn back into his human counterpart. He grabbed the note while he munched away on a chicken leg.

Hmm... I admit, I've thought about just sneaking out by using Padfoot... but there's something here that's almost... it's... he's telling me to wait until I see Fudge, and then I'll know to escape. Throwing the now-meatless bone out of the window, he quickly grabbed another. Thanks to the Occlumency and Padfoot, I can certainly withstand a bit more time here. The Dementors don't really affect me anymore, Padfoot even less. As much as I want my freedom, I get the feeling that it could be far more expensive than I know. He threw the next bone out of the window, grabbing a huge pork pie from the basket. I really wish I could speak to this guy. I'd love to know what Harry's up to... poor pup. He came to a decision. I'll stay. When I next see Fudge, I'll wait for my sign. I'm not so far gone that waiting to murder Pettigrew can't be put on hold for a few months.

Hundreds of miles away, an old man in a child's body sighed in relief, without knowing why.

After sitting in the common room for an hour reading yet another of his beloved Bond books, Harry put it back into his trunk, which he then secured inside his Portkey box, before heading down to the Great Hall. He was a man on a mission...

Once in the Great Hall, he immediately sought out Professors Sprout, McGonagall and Flitwick. The three were conspiring together, sitting closely, presumably about Snape.

"Good morning, Professors. Do you have a moment?" He asked politely.

Looking up, McGonagall noted that the young man in front of her was the very personification of determination. "Is this a 'Harry' moment, or a 'Mr. Potter' moment?" McGonagall asked.

“Er... it’s a bit of both, Professor.” Harry replied. Sprout, on the other hand, looked scandalised at the familiarity.

“Well, then, Harry,” Flitwick said, leaning forward, “what can we do for you today?”

“I’ve been having a bit of a think about the petrified student situation, Professors. It took me a bit of time, but I’ve found a way to help them much sooner. I’d like your permission to leave the school, and I need an escort on my mission, Professors.” Harry said. “There’s a small farm in Tibet that produce ingredients, and they have what we need. While I’m there, I’d appreciate Professor Sprout’s assistance.”

“A potion ingredient?” Sprout asked, confused. “What sort of ingredient?”

“Fully grown mandrake, ma’am.” Harry replied. “They always have them available. I plan to go and collect some for Colin and Mrs. Norris. Maybe take Neville, if he’s available.”

“And why do you feel the need to collect some mandrake, Harry?” Flitwick asked. “Pomona’s will be ready in the next four to six months. We can have our petrified student back then.”

“That’s certainly true, sir.” Harry replied. “But, poor Colin will have missed out on six months of schooling. His first year, too. And Mr. Filch will have been without his pet for that length of time. I... I need to do this, Professor. I knew something bad was happening when Colin was petrified. I-I could have stopped it.”

Sprout leaned closer, her Hufflepuff sense of justice coming to the fore. “Mr. Potter, are you saying that you had advance knowledge about these attacks?” Sprout demanded. “If so, you should have come to a member of staff immediately!”

Dumbledore cleared his throat from behind the three professors. “Good morning, Professors. Good morning, Harry.” He slid into his chair. “Pomona, I have already spoken to Harry about this. We have shared out information about these attacks, and any possible actions.

Our conclusions are the same.” He reached for the tureen of kippers. “What is it you’re planning, Mr. Potter?”

“I found a Mandrake farm in Tibet, sir. I’ve got the co-ordinates. I get go there and grab some mandrake, and brew up the restorative draught on the way back. Colin and Mrs. Norris can be unpetrified by lunchtime.”

The old man nodded. “A fine plan. What lessons do you have this morning?”

“Potions, sir, followed by History of Magic.”

“Ah!” Dumbledore chuckled. “The irony of using your potions lesson to create a mandrake draught. I think you’ll earn an ‘outstanding’ this morning, Harry.”

“Thank you, sir.” Harry replied. “So, can we go?”

McGonagall looked at Dumbledore, who inclined his head slightly.

“Very well, Mr. Potter. How exactly do you propose we get to Tibet to obtain this ingredient?”

Harry just smiled.

As he led the three teachers to the seventh floor to collect Neville, Harry pondered to himself. I should have stopped this, not let it get to this stage. I only hope Luna can keep up with any changes to the timeline.

The small group spotted Percy coming out of the portrait hole, clad in his robes and with his prefect’s badge shining on his chest. Realising that this was an opportune moment, Harry wiggled his finger, removing the compulsion charm from Percy. The young man blinked for a moment, before greeting the professors.

McGonagall authorised the group to enter the Gryffindor common room, leading them to the couches in front of the fire. Harry sat down

on his favourite chair. Ah, I've missed this chair. I wonder if I could nick it and stick it in the Ravenclaw common room?

While Harry was settling into the chair, McGonagall sent Percy up to the second year dormitory, to wake up Neville. A few moments later, a barely-dressed Neville appeared at the bottom of the stairs, bleary-eyed and still half-asleep.

"Morning, Neville!" Harry said cheerfully.

"You're far too 'wake for this time of day." Neville grumbled. "What d'you want?"

"Get dressed, you lazy git." Harry replied nonchalantly. "Going collecting some mandrake from Tibet, and need your green thumb."

"Tomorrow." Neville slurred, before turning and heading back up the stairs.

"Come on, Neville!" Harry said chirpily. "Big day! Gonna wake up Creevey and the demon cat. Need your help."

"Tomorrow."

"Mr. Longbottom!" McGonagall snapped, stepping forward. "Get dressed, and be back down in fifteen minutes!"

He stiffened slightly at the less than friendly tone in his Head of House's voice. "Kay, Ma'am." Neville slumped away.

While they were waiting, Harry called across to Percy, who was sat on the couch, looking into the fire. "Hey, Percy?"

"Yes, Harry?" The prefect, who was polishing his badge yet again, looked over at the younger boy.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"If a situation arose where you had to choose between your job and your family, what would you pick?"

Percy looked taken aback for a moment. "What on earth made you ask that?"

Harry shrugged. "Just curious, I suppose. I'm actually kinda jealous of you. You've got all those siblings, and loving folks... sometimes, I just wonder what that'd be like."

Nodding slowly, Percy pondered. "Well... I suppose my family... I mean... they've supported me for years, helped me become what I am now." He stared at Harry. "I admit, I've never really thought about it that way before. Living in a large family, especially my family, it's always been a bit of a mission. Fred and George pranking everyone, hearing Ron complain about things, listening to Ginny..." He trailed off as he looked at Harry, "I presume Fred and George have told you about Ginny?"

"What, the whole 'future wife' bit? Yeah." Harry grimaced. "To be honest, Perce, from what I know of her, I doubt that'll happen."

Percy shrugged. "Your choice." He sobered up a little. "I've never thought about it from the 'orphan' point of view. As much as my family irritates me, and living with Fred and George is irritating, they do support me." He placed a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder. "You've given me a lot to think about, young Harry. Thank you."

Harry shrugged again. "Just something to ponder, Perce."

Neville came staggering back into the common room, wearing a pair of mud-streaked pants, a dirty shirt and a pair of dragon hide boots. "Right, I'm dressed for battling evil mandrakes. Where are we going?"

Harry nodded at Percy before standing up. "Going to Tibet, Nev. They have mandrakes available. Fully grown ones."

"And why..." he trailed off as his face split in half from an immense yawn, "can't we wait until Professor Sprout's are done?"

“Because that won’t be for another four months, at the earliest.” Harry replied, leading Neville to the portrait hole, where the Professors were waiting impatiently. “Besides, we can go there, get the ugly little bugger, make the draught and be back inside three or so hours.”

“Joy.” Neville yawned again. “How we getting there? Your box?”

“Yep.”

Once in the Ravenclaw common room, Harry saw Padma and Luna waiting at the bottom of the stairs, with Hermione just coming down the stairs. “Good morning, beauteous ladies!” Harry proclaimed loudly, startling them.

“Morning, Harry.” Hermione came over, pressing a chaste kiss to his lips. “What’s going on?”

Harry gestured to the Professors behind him. “I’ve had an idea about curing Colin and the demon cat, so we’re just nipping out for some potions supplies. Won’t be more than a few hours.”

“Oh.” She looked at the impatient professors. “Do you need any help?”

Harry looked torn for a moment. “As much as I enjoy taking trips with you, my sweet Hermione, best not this morning. We shouldn’t be too long.”

Leading the small group up the stairs into his dorm room, Harry was about to enter the Box when Sprout stopped him. “Mr. Potter... I realise that both you and Miss Granger were inside this... object when it appeared in the Great Hall. However, I am a little... a little bigger than Miss Granger, and I’m not certain that we could all fit in there.”

Harry chuckled and placed his hand against the door, bypassing the defences. The door opened with a creak, revealing the cavernous interior. “I don’t think there’s a problem, Professor.”

Once the group had made their way inside, Harry dashed to the console and slid a lever up, closing the door with a clang. He moved

round to the monitor, and began tapping away at the keyboard. "Okay... setting co-ordinates 31o37" North, 87o54" East." Harry tapped a few more buttons. "And, initiating gyroscope..." He pulled down a small lever, prompting a wheezing/groaning sound to fill the cavernous interior. "Dematerialising..." There was a minute tremble in the floor panelling, signalling the ship was in flight.

"Er... Mr. Potter?" Sprout spoke up. "Could you explain to me what's going on?"

Harry smiled at the friendly Herbologist. "Basically, Madam Sprout, this 'object' as you called it, is my ship. We're going to Tibet to recover a fully grown mandrake. Now, I'm not saying that your mandrakes are inferior, quite the opposite. However, it will take months for them to be ready. So, we're going getting a pre-prepared one."

"Taking a Portkey would get us there, but we'd all be feeling sick as dogs afterwards. This ship means we can enjoy the trip in comfort. Perhaps even partake of a nice beverage or three."

"Ah... very well." Sprout retreated to one of the chairs near the console. Deciding to take pity on the professors, since he'd interrupted their breakfast, Harry disappeared through the door, quickly putting the kettle on while throwing some teabags into the teapot. Making the brew, Harry quickly poured five cups, returning to the console room.

Once everyone had been served, Harry busied himself with one of the banks of controls.

Neville sidled up. "What ya doing?"

Harry smiled to himself. "I'm altering the runes that control the internal configuration to build a small potions laboratory. And a sick bay. It's fairly easy." He stopped his tapping to look up at Neville. "You know, Neville, we've haven't really spoken much. I don't know a great deal about you. I mean, I know that you're Frank and Alice's son, you live with your Gran and you're frighteningly good at Herbology, but I don't

know a lot else. You know quite a bit about me, 'cause my life's an open book."

Neville looked a bit nervous, but answered. "Well... what would you like to know?"

Harry resumed his tapping. "According to the rumour mill when you first started, and this is mainly Malfoy spouting off, you're considered a near-squib. Now, I know better than that, but I was just wondering why that sort of thing would be bandied about the school."

Neville's nervousness increased. "Well... er... I'm not very good at performing magic." He replied. "You've seen me in potions, and I'm pretty pants at transfiguration. Not too bad in charms, though."

Harry stopped tapping. "What utter bollocks, Nev. You're a very powerful wizard, I can see it. You just lack confidence. Not surprising, really."

"Mr. Potter?" McGonagall stepped forward. "Why do you say 'not surprising'?"

Harry looked up, realising that the three teachers had been listening in. "Well, ma'am, his grandmother's Augusta Longbottom. From the scuttlebutt I've heard, she's old-school strict. Powerful, but quite steeped in tradition. Plus, there's the whole Bellatrix thing."

Instantly turning white, Neville stepped backwards. "W-What?"

"Bellatrix LeStrange?" Harry glanced over at Neville, who looked to be on the verge of a panic attack. "Would you like me to help you with your confidence, Neville? I do know a way, but you won't like it."

Neville was torn; Harry was extremely powerful, and had near-miraculous control over his magic, but the merest mention of the evil Bellatrix LeStrange had thrown him off. "W-What do you mean?"

Harry took a deep breath. What he was about to do was a rather cruel, but extremely effective course of action. "You remember

Bellatrix LeStrange, Neville. She's the one who tortured your parents to insanity right in front of you, forcing you to watch."

"Stop it!" Neville hissed.

"Why?" Harry plastered an evil smirk on his face. "You're too weak to stop her, Neville. When she gets out of Azkaban, and she will get out, you'll be no match for her. She'll take everything you care about and destroy it utterly."

"Mr. Potter!" McGonagall spat, drawing her wand.

"Stop it, Harry!" Neville snapped angrily. "Don't talk about things you don't understand."

"Aw, is widdle baby Neville gonna fight me?" Harry sing-songed in an eerie copy of Bellatrix. "Just like his widdle parents."

Neville roared, thrusting his hands out. He began to glow with a bright white light as a bright red beam arched from his hands, slamming into Harry and throwing him into the wall of the console room. Hitting heavily, Harry dropped to the floor like a stone.

"Now, that I respect!" Harry replied, shaking his head as he tried to clear the cobwebs. He hauled himself to his feet, staggering back to Neville, smiling gently at him. "Yeah, mate... you're a weak wizard. A near-squib... who just threw me across the room with wandless magic."

Neville looked down at his hands, then back up at the grinning Harry. "I hate you, Harry. That was cruel."

"No, you don't hate me, Neville." Harry replied without missing a beat. "But, you've just realised that you have power. Power to protect. Power to deliver justice." He winked. "Now, since we've got an hour to kill, let's see what else we can do."

McGonagall holstered her wand. "Mr. Potter, you will explain yourself this instant!"

Harry just looked at Neville. "Well, mate?"

The young Gryffindor sighed. "I hate you." He replied in a small voice. "That was a dirty trick, Harry." He turned to McGonagall. "Professor, Harry was just... proving a point."

"What point?" McGonagall demanded.

"Control, Neville." Harry replied. "Willpower. Focus. When I was running my mouth off at you, you wanted nothing more than to stop me. You had a clear goal in mind, and your magic made it happen. Now, imagine being able to harness all that power in class, with a wand, and you'll prove that you're not weak."

Neville looked at Harry, then at McGonagall. "Professor, could I have a matchstick?"

McGonagall blinked, then conjured a matchstick, passing it over to Neville. He drew his wand, and tapped the matchstick once. It instantly shifted into a perfect needle. No wand movements. No incantation.

"Well done, Mr. Longbottom." McGonagall said, taking the needle and looking closely at it. "Perfectly done. I will expect to see this level of focus in my classroom."

"Yes, Professor." Neville replied, then glanced back at Harry. "That was still a dirty trick, Harry."

"Yes. Yes, it was." Harry agreed amiably. "I like dirty tricks; you can't deny they're effective. Combine that focus with your Occlumency, and we'll have you into a warrior wizard in no time." He turned back to the console. "Now... where was I?"

The rest of the trip was extremely routine. Neville got into a pitched fight with the mandrake, which didn't want to leave its cosy little soil home, until Neville punched its nose and hauled it up.

Once back in the potions lab in the Box, which was little more than a workbench with a cauldron sitting on top, Neville began stewing the mandrake, slicing it into little pieces.

Harry always had trouble with dealing with mandrakes, since they had little faces and a definite personality. Still, he left that part for Neville. He opened the door to a cupboard, pulling out an old potions textbook.

With Sprout's help, the three began brewing the mandrake restorative draught, completely ignoring the fact that it should have been Snape who was making it.

It took just over an hour, pulling ingredients from wherever Harry had secreted them throughout the box. Once the vile smell filled the air, Neville pronounced the cauldron full of tan goop complete, and poured out two goblets. Harry put the remaining goop under a stasis charm, just in case.

The Box began to rematerialise in the hospital wing, the noise prompting Pomfrey to come bustling out with her wand drawn. She'd not been at the opening feast, and hadn't seen the Box before.

"What the devil..." She began, only to smile when she saw Harry come out of the box, a small tray with two steaming goblets on it.

"Madam Pomfrey! What an utter delight to see you!" Harry said joyfully. "And it's even more delightful that I'm not here at your less than tender mercies."

She smiled warmly at him. "Agreed, Mr. Potter. What have you got there?" She did a double take as she realised what he'd said. "You cheeky little scamp!"

Harry grinned at her, then glanced down at the tray. "Thank you. And this is just a little mandrake juice for Colin and the demon cat. Should have them up and about fairly soon."

"Oh?" Pomfrey looked a little uncertain. "I thought Professor Snape couldn't make it until Pomona's mandrakes were ready."

Harry walked past Pomfrey, placing the tray on Colin's bedside table. Grabbing one of the goblets, he winced as the pungent smell of mandrake filled his nose. "Yeah... kinda ignored him. Neville brewed most of it, really."

"N-Neville?" Poppy stammered. "Mr. Longbottom made a potion?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yes, Neville. When he's not got tall, dark and greasy loitering over his shoulder, he's a surprisingly good brewer."

"Thanks, Harry." Neville appeared in the doorway to the box. "I'm certain that was almost ten percent compliment in there."

"Oh... I'd say fifteen, Nev, in a bad light with a god that takes pity on you." Harry replied, grabbing a small funnel from the tray and forcing it into Colin's mouth. Holding his breath, he began pouring the noxious brew into the funnel, hearing it sink into Colin. As the fluid hit the young boy's skin, it began to undo the Petrification, turning near-stone back into soft flesh.

He turned, handing the small tray to Pomfrey. "I'll let you do Mrs. Norris. Skinny little runt doesn't like me."

Scowling lightly, Pomfrey took the tray. "Thank you, Harry. I appreciate your delegating this task to me."

Smiling, and putting a full-power puppy dog look on his face, he nodded. "No problem."

Predictably, Poppy melted at the look. "Fine. It'll take a bit of time for these to work, so you might as well head to lessons. What would you like me to tell Mr. Creevey when he wakes up?"

Harry shrugged. "Nothing. Let him think it was your own prodigious skill that woke him up." He turned back to Neville. "Might as well go and get dressed, Nev. Got History of Magic in twenty minutes."

Neville, Flitwick, Sprout and McGonagall trailed out of the Box, before Harry strolled back inside. "I'll take the Box back and meet you

outside History, Nev. Professors, thank you for your assistance.” As he headed inside, the doors closed behind him, the wheezing/groaning sound filling the air.

The next few days were extremely different, prompting Luna’s eyes to glow randomly as she absorbed the changes to the timeline. Fortunately, she hadn’t popped up to Harry and given him another migraine... update, another update, but she was turning in to a remarkably effective nightlight.

Harry headed to the library, where he knew a bunch of Hufflepuffs were sitting. He gave a grim smile as he overheard the same conversation as last time. He activated a disillusionment charm on himself, since it was more impressive fading into view than whipping off his cloak, and walked to the foot of the table, sitting down quietly, the movement of the chair imperceptible.

“...told Justin to hide up in our dormitory. I mean to say, if Potter’s marked him down as his next victim, it’s best if he keeps a low profile for a while. Of course, Justin’s been waiting for something like this to happen ever since he let slip to Potter he was Muggleborn. Just actually told him he’d been down for Eton. That’s not the kind of thing you bandy about with Slytherin’s heir on the loose, is it?”

Hannah Abbott, Susan’s closest friend in Hufflepuff, looked around anxiously as she leaned closer to McMillan. “You definitely think it is Potter, then, Ernie?”

“Hannah, he’s a Parselmouth. Everyone knows that’s the mark of a Dark wizard. Have you ever heard of a decent one who can talk to snakes? They called Slytherin himself Serpent-tongue.”

The group murmured to each other, looking furtive and scared. Ernie carried on. “Remember what was written on the wall? ‘Enemies of the Heir, Beware.’ Potter must’ve had some sort of run-in with Filch. Next thing we know, Filch’s cat’s attacked. That first-year, Creevey, was annoying Potter for photos, taking pictures of him randomly. Next thing we know, Creevey’s been attacked.”

Hannah looked a bit more sure of herself. "He always seems so nice, though... and he's the one who made You-Know-Who disappear. Plus, he's one of Susan's closest friends. He can't be all bad."

Ernie leaned in closer to his friends. "No-one knows how he survived that attack by You-Know-Who. I mean to say, he was only a baby when it happened. He should have been blasted into smithereens. Only a really powerful Dark wizard could have survived a curse like that." He dropped his voice until it was barely more than a whisper, and said, "That's probably why You-Know-Who wanted to kill him in the first place. Didn't want another Dark Lord competing with him. I wonder what other powers Potter's been hiding?"

Grinning wildly to himself, Harry allowed the disillusionment charm to fail, revealing himself. Hannah let out a quiet scream, while Ernie made a choking noise.

"Hidden powers? Well, I can cook. Sharp dresser, and one hell of a dancer." Harry said in a mockingly-cheerful voice, before looking at the rest of the students. "And how're some of my favourite Hufflepuffs doing?"

"P-Potter!" Ernie stammered. "How long were you there?"

"Long enough, Ernie. It's amazing the things you can overhear when loitering with intent in the library. Now, based on that conversation, I think you have some questions for me, don't you?"

Hannah nodded. "Are you the Heir of Slytherin?"

Harry looked at her, slightly annoyed. She flinched. "You were there in the Great Hall when I told you all who the Heir of Slytherin is. It's Voldemort. Not me."

"How did you get into the Great Hall in that... coffin thing?" Ernie asked. "I've read *Hogwarts: A History*, and it states that only the Headmaster can come through the wards."

"Oh, Ernie..." Harry replied in mock-disappointment. "Not only the Headmaster. An Heir can always find sanctuary here at Hogwarts."

"But... you said you weren't the Heir of the Slytherin!" Ernie replied.

Harry shook his head. "Couldn't have had this conversation with Ravenclaws, could I? They'd have put it together so much faster."

"You're the Heir to a Founder?" Hannah asked, leaning a little closer. "Which one?"

"Which two?" Harry replied. "But, yes, I'm an Heir. That's how I got to school. Now, I am not the Heir of Slytherin, and I'm not gonna tell you again. As to the Parseltongue and how I survived Voldemort's..." He stopped as they flinched. "Oh, grow a pair, all of you! It's only a bloody word. Anyway... er... oh, yeah. I survived the Killing curse... because of my Mum. She protected me, a living sacrifice."

Ernie, while pompous and irritating, was not dumb. "They're illegal!"

Harry gave him an odd-look. "She was about to die, Ernie. I don't think she really gave a shit at that point. Are you telling me that you wouldn't do the same for your kid, when you have one?"

Hannah nodded. "I would. I'm really close to my Mum, and I know she'd do it for me."

"Exactly." He turned back to Ernie. "Now, you seem to think that I was trying to make the snake attack Justin, instead of stopping it. Why? I told Justin to step back, and stopped the snake. I picked it up, and it didn't attack anyone. Christ, Susan was playing Peek-a-boo with it! Do you really think I'd attack a student?"

At that point, even the most die-hard Slytherin would be hard-pressed to think that Harry was trying to kill him. "No." Ernie admitted grudgingly. "But, Justin's still pretty scared of you. He's... he's not fond of snakes."

Harry nodded absently as he checked his watch. Hmm... it's that time already. Now... how to make this work in my favour... Ooh! He flooded his eyes with magic, letting them glow green in the brightness of the library. "Oh, shit! All of you, come with me, now!"

He turned and bolted from the library, the Hufflepuffs in hot pursuit as he bolted for the fourth floor.

Luna looked up, her eyes glowing white as she read the future, seeing it change. You're changing time, yet she resists your attempts to bend her out of shape. Curious...She stood up, clicking her fingers. The rest of her friends noted her glowing eyes, sighing to themselves.

"There's about to be another attack. Harry's on his way to stop it. We must get to the fourth floor, main corridor, east side." The six were gone in the blink of an eye.

Harry pelted down the corridor, seeing Justin calmly talking to Now-Headless Nick near one of the corridor junctions. As soon as he saw Harry running towards him, several of his Hufflepuff year-mates tailing behind, he froze, thinking Harry was coming to kill him while his housemates tried to prevent it.

He never noticed the grinding noise behind him, nor the quiet hissing as something ancient prowled the hallway behind him.

Harry pulsed some magic into his legs, using it to throw himself through the air, bodily impacting Justin and knocking them both down the corridor. Quickly spinning round, Harry thrust up his wand, creating a shield in the corridor, just before the junction. The remaining Hufflepuffs crashed to a halt as they hit the glowing wall of energy.

The scream that filtered from the junction was enough to chill everyone's blood. The crackle of raw power flooding the corridor set hackles up, and a wave of static discharge filled the air. A ghostly green light filled the junction, before fading.

Harry could hear Blink's unsatisfied hissing as she slithered away, upset that she'd missed yet another target.

Underneath Harry, Justin was trembling, thinking that the Heir of Slytherin was there to kill him. Harry stood up, tilting his head from side to side, making the joints pop.

At that moment, Hermione and the rest of the gang bolted round, quickly taking in the situation; Justin lying underneath Harry, safe and clearly not petrified, the other Hufflepuff's behind a shield, looking on with undisguised awe and fear.

Harry flicked his wand, cancelling the shield. He kept his hand raised. "Stay there for a minute." He stood, and poked his head round the corner. "Oh, that's nasty..." He turned back. "Justin, before you think I just tried to kill you, you might want to take a look round the corner."

Justin took a deep breath, peering round the corner. What he saw was terrifying. Now-Headless Nick was floating a few inches above the floor, his body blackened, blasted and burnt. His head had fallen to the ground, the eyes wide and a look of terror on his face. The vague smell of burning ectoplasm could be detected in the air.

Harry flicked his wand at one of the speakers on the wall. "Headmaster Dumbledore, Deputy Headmistress McGonagall, Senior Healer Pomfrey, please report to the fourth floor, east corridor immediately. Repeat, please report to the fourth floor, east corridor. Thank you." He flicked his wand again, closing the channel.

Justin looked at Harry, awe on his face. "You... you saved me."

"No." Harry replied, not looking at Justin. "Forget this, Justin. Although, if you could stop the rest of your housemates bad-mouthing me, I'd appreciate it."

McGonagall, Pomfrey and Dumbledore appeared in the middle of the corridor, clearly using a Portkey to bypass the pesky climb. All three had wands out, and stood in a trio-back-to-back formation.

"Excellent response time, Professor." Harry complimented. "What was that? Sixteen seconds? Pretty good."

Dumbledore lowered his wand as he saw the two groups. "What has happened?"

“Another attack. Fortunately, I was able to stop this one. Justin would have been petrified. Nick got zapped by... whatever’s doing this. That’s why I asked Madam Pomfrey to come. Maybe she can help.”

Pomfrey was waving her wand over Nick’s prone form, quickly taking readings.

“How did you know about the attack, my boy?” Dumbledore asked. “Do you know who’s doing this? Did you receive a tip?”

Hannah cleared her throat timidly. “Er... his eyes lit up, Professor.”

Thanks for that, Hannah... I’ll bet he thinks I’m a seer, now.

“Indeed?” Dumbledore stared at Harry intently. “Tell me, Harry, did you see something?”

“I knew to come here, Professor.” Harry replied. “I just... knew. I knew it was gonna be Justin and Nick. To be honest, since Nick’s a ghost, I didn’t try and keep him out of the way. I know it sounds a bit heartless, but he’s already dead.”

“You just... knew? Have you ever had flashes like this before? Perhaps seeing events happen before they do?”

“I’m not a seer, sir. I’ve never had a ‘flash’ like you’re describing, nor have I had a vision of the future.”

“Then how did you know?”

“I just did, sir. Anyway, Madam Pomfrey should be able to help Nick, Justin’s safe and sound, no-one’s hurt. So, I’m going for a walk.” Harry started to walk towards his friends.

“Harry.” Dumbledore called out. “If you have any more information regarding these attacks, or anything else that may be threatening the school, I would request that you share it with the staff. It’s important that we know to protect the students.”

“Sir.” Harry replied, not actually answering. He carried on walking, his friends falling into formation around him.

Harry headed back to the Ravenclaw dorms, slumping onto one of the couches. “What have I done...” He murmured to himself. His friends quickly gathered around him.

“Harry?” Hermione asked.

He looked up. “I just wanted a nice, quiet time. Now I’ve got Dumbledore thinking I’m some kind of seer, Justin thinks I’m a hero... I didn’t want this.”

Blaise, the cool, logical one began to speak. “Harry, what would’ve happened had you not gone to that corridor?”

“Justin would have been petrified, same as Mrs. Norris and Colin. Nick got the zap.” Harry replied.

“How do you know that it would have been a Petrification? We still don’t know what’s doing this, do we?” Harry looked guilty as he looked into Blaise’s eyes. “You do know?”

Harry looked at Luna, who nodded, then at Hermione, who snuggled a little closer on the couch next to him. “It’s... it’s a basilisk. King of Serpents. I heard it hissing when it was moving. It was disappointed when it missed.”

“A Basilisk.” Blaise repeated. “Slytherin’s monster is a Basilisk. Marvellous. They can kill with a look. At the risk of being crude, why isn’t anyone dead yet?”

Hermione thought back. “Justin would have seen it through Nick, so the effect would be diffracted. Colin... didn’t you say that his camera was melted?” Harry nodded, impressed with the ‘brightest witch of the age’. It had taken her months longer to work all this out in the original timeline. “And the cat... we still don’t know about the cat, since we don’t know where she was zapped. But, wasn’t the floor outside Myrtle’s bathroom flooded? She does it quite often.”

“So, it’s possible that Mrs. Norris saw the reflection.” Padma concluded. “The question now is, who’s doing this? And where is the Chamber of Secrets?” She looked at Harry. “Do you know the answers to those questions?”

Harry looked up, panic on his face. “Please don’t ask me that. I promised that I would never lie to you, and I don’t want to break that promise. Please...”

Neville rested his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Have you been letting this happen?”

“In a manner of speaking... yes.”

Before anyone else could speak, Luna cleared her throat. “Harry is working for the Greater Good. Unlike the Headmaster’s version of the Greater Good, where people are used as chess pieces, Harry is working to make sure that the people survive the upcoming war. For lack of a better phrase, he is a tool of destiny. I understand and support what he’s doing.”

Hermione pouted prettily. “I still wish you’d tell us what you’re doing.”

“I wish I could.” Harry whispered. “I really wish I could.” He looked up at Hermione. “Can I have a hug?”

The resulting seven person pileup was the talk of the Ravenclaw common room for days.

It took Harry two days to make his decision; he’d recover the Horcrux from Ginny Weasley, any way possible. Unfortunately for Harry, thanks to his prodigious memory, he recalled that Ginny wouldn’t decide to throw the diary away until after Christmas, and he wanted to get it sorted out before too much time passed.

In order to get hold of Ginny’s schedule, he’d had to do something extremely unpleasant: talk to Colin Creevey. Oh, the kid was nice enough, playful and polite, but he was like an overexcited puppy! Harry half-expected him to suddenly pee on the floor in pleasure. He’d managed to persuade the boy to give him a copy of the first

years' timetable, and was now loitering outside the potions dungeon under his invisibility cloak.

As the first years departed noisily, complaining about Snape being a bastard (a point of view Harry could readily agree with), he saw Ginny trudge out, clutching her bag like a life line.

Damn it, Weasley... drop it... come on... Deciding to be helpful, Harry cast a weak cutting charm at her bag strap, making it fall off her shoulder. Ha! Success! The diary skated over the floor. A quick Accio brought it to his hand.

Ginny frowned to herself as he bag snapped. Bloody second-hand bag... Why, oh why couldn't I have had something new? She knelt down at picked up her books, looking casually for the diary. When she realised that it wasn't there, a full-blown panic attack occurred. She glanced round, noticing the book just beyond her reach. She watched with terror as it soared into the air, vanishing into a ripple of displacement. Oh, shit!

Before she could think of anything else, her eyes flashed red, as a submerged personality aspect managed to take control of the body, watching the ripple vanish.

So... the Potter brat has managed to obtain his father's invisibility cloak. I had wondered why it wasn't at Godric's Hollow... no matter, no matter. I believe a little... retribution is in order for this disgrace.

With a tap of her wand on her forehead, Ginny Weasley performed magic no first year was capable of, as she vanished, her bag neatly packing itself and flying onto her shoulder, before it vanished too.

Harry quickly headed back to his dormitory, making sure to avoid his friends. The last thing he needed was to get near Luna while carrying an evil soul fragment. He knew that she'd pitch a hissy-fit of unparalleled magnitude.

I need to get this back to the ship, and under lock and key where it belongs. Harry thought as he snuck through the corridors. I don't want there to be any chance of Ginny breaking into the dorm room to

recover it. And even if she does break into the dorm room, even she, possessed by Voldemort, can't break into the box.

As he approached the fifth floor, he whipped the Invisibility cloak from himself, neatly shrinking it down and tucking it into his pocket. He could feel the pull of the compulsion on the Horcrux, the magic interacting with his own, trying to force him to write in the diary. The last thing he wanted to do was allow himself to open up to writing in the cursed object.

He entered the common room, noting gladly that Hermione and the gang weren't present, and headed up the stairs to his dorm room. He heard the comforting hum of the Box's reactor, ticking over since the ship was inactive. He could almost feel the vibration through the floor, the sensations soothing and comforting him.

He pulled the diary from his robes, another wave of sickness washing over him. It was because of the diary that he didn't sense the other until it was almost too late.

Harry span round, a Protego shield on his lips as he deflected a spell. In front of him, the outline of a small figure, disillusioned, stood by the door.

§Potter...§ The figure hissed. §Surrender my diary now, and I might allow you to live.§

Harry summoned his wand to his hand, aiming it at the figure. §I don't think so. You and I both know it's needed, so the odds of me giving it back? You're shit out of luck.§ He cast a Petrificus spell at the intruder, who blocked it casually.

§Then you leave me no choice. Crucio!§

Harry had learned a lot in his life. Spells cast in Parseltongue were substantially more powerful than their Latin or English counterparts, and were far more difficult to block. Harry didn't have time to form a shield or move an object into the path of the spell before it hit him.

For a few moments, his nervous system was lit up like a Christmas tree as the evil energy washed over him. He dropped to his knees, completely unprepared for an Unforgiveable curse from an eleven year old. He simply didn't think that Ginny's body had the power to cast a Cruciatus.

The instant the spell ended, Harry raised his hand, but he was a fraction of a second too late to stop the Petrificus spell that came his way. Fortunately, it would only take a few seconds for his innate magic to overpower the curse.

The disillusioned figure knelt down next to him, putting the wand away, before reaching into their robes for something else.

§I could let you live, Potter... but I like the idea of my vessel killing you. I've heard so much about you, and I want you to die a most horrible and painful death. Enjoy...§

Harry caught a glint of silver as it was plunged into his chest...

– CHAPTER THIRTY –

Introspection

The following morning, Hermione stood at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at the boys' staircase. Tapping her foot lightly, she glanced at her watch. This is curious... he's never this late. Not even on Sundays... Padma came down the stairs, tucking in her blouse and yawning widely.

"Merlin, I hate mornings..." She muttered, looking round the common room. "Harry not up?"

"Not yet." Hermione replied, checking her watch again. Maybe a couple more minutes... it's possible he got up early again to do another trip out.

Luna staggered down the steps, pulling her jumper over her head, before pulling her robes on. As soon as she hit the common room floor, she glanced round, her face scrunching up in confusion. Her eyes glowed silver for a moment, as she scanned the room. "Where's Harry?" She asked, her voice ethereal and dreamy.

"Not down yet." Hermione said, staring at her. This can't be good... She thought.

Padma cleared her throat. "Luna, can you tell us anything?"

For a moment, Luna didn't respond, until her eyes widened comically, and she bolted for the boys' staircase. "He's hurt! Move!"

The three began running, heading up to the second floor, then down the corridor into Harry's room. The instant they entered, all three girls recoiled at the smell of blood.

Hermione quickly took in the situation; Harry was laying on his back, facing the door, his wand lying next to his right hand. In his chest was a standard potions knife, buried up to the hilt, just above his heart. Surrounding Harry was a crimson pool, his robes soaked in blood, his face pale.

Fortunately for Hermione, her constitution was strong, as she managed to force the urge to retch down. "Luna, hospital wing, go!" The blonde vanished. "Pad', Flitwick!" The girl disappeared. "Stay with us, Harry..." Hermione muttered.

While waiting for medical assistance, Hermione quickly scanned the rest of the room. Harry's trunk, where he basically kept his clothes so the House Elves could easily access them, had been smashed, his clothing spread all over the floor. His textbooks from the previous day had been torn and sprinkled everywhere. Fortunately, the door to the Portkey box was shut, and she knew from experience that only Harry and those he authorised could get in there.

Taking a chance, she placed her hand on the door. The magi-lock clicked for a moment, before the door swung open. The lights inside were dimmed, making the console room look dark and sinister. That was not what distressed her, though. A single, tolling bell sounded, ominous in the darkness. This is not good. She thought to herself.

She stepped outside, closing the door firmly behind her. Harry was still lying on the floor, but she didn't dare touch him. She knew next to nothing about medicine, but she knew that pulling out the knife would only make the bleeding worse.

Slowly, she knelt down next to him, taking one pale and slightly too-thin hand in hers. "Harry... don't... don't die." A tear dropped from her cheek, splashing onto his shirt. "Don't leave me, Harry, please..."

Hermione's musing was cut off as several people appeared in the dorm room, Poppy appearing in the doorway, dashing forward and dropping to her knees next to Harry instantly. Her wand flicked as she performed basic diagnostic charms.

"Report, Miss Granger." Flitwick commanded brusquely.

"Harry didn't come downstairs this morning." Hermione said quickly. "We came up here, and found him like... that."

“Anything out of the ordinary?” Flitwick asked, flicking his wand around the room.

“His trunk’s destroyed, sir. Fortunately, he keeps everything of value inside the Box. I don’t think anything’s missing.”

“Hmm...” Flitwick murmured. “Curious... there’s evidence of some rather... inappropriate spells.” He shook his head. “Poppy?”

The Medi-Witch was working frantically. “The knife directly penetrated his heart. It’s fortunate that whoever did this didn’t pull it out. He’d have bled out long ago. As it is, he’s in absolutely critical condition.” She looked up. “We need to get him to the hospital wing immediately.”

Hermione took a moment to think. “Can he be moved, just a bit?”

Poppy looked at Hermione. “It’s very dangerous.”

“Can you put him on his bed, and Portkey that to the hospital wing?”

Flitwick’s jaw dropped for a moment and the sense and potential speed for treatment. “Yes. Yes, we can. Poppy, I’ll levitate him onto the bed, then put the whole thing under a stasis charm.” Flicking his wand again, he slowly raised Harry up. “It’s a shame we can’t use his moving cupboard...” He murmured as Harry settled on the bed.

“Poppy, lie down next to him.” Flitwick commanded. “You know that Portkeys tend to be... shaky. You’ll need to help keep him stable. Miss Granger, Miss Lovegood, you too.” All three ladies scrambled onto the bed. “Miss Patil, please make your way to the Headmaster’s office. His password is ‘Maltesers’. Please ask him to head directly to the Hospital Wing.” Grabbing hold of the bedpost, Flitwick tapped the bed with his wand, causing it to flash blue for a moment, before it disappeared in a blaze of colour.

Padma was already running out of the door, heading for the second floor.

It took Dumbledore just under a minute to race into the Hospital Wing, Padma hot on his heels. As he passed through the doors, his countenance wasn't that of a kindly grandfather, or a lemon-drop obsessed Headmaster. It was that of a warrior, of a general. "Report!" He barked as he entered.

"Severe blood loss. Massive damage to the heart." Poppy replied, without breaking stride. "He's gone into shock."

"Filius?"

"Evidence of high-level combat." The diminutive charms master replied quickly. "An extremely powerful Protego, beyond a second year. Some kind of Cruciatus-"

"Thank you!" Poppy exclaimed. "That's why his nervous system's lit up like a Christmas tree..." She quickly bustled to a cupboard, grabbing a potion and a rather large hypodermic syringe. "We're going to need to inject anti-Cruciatus potion into him. Whatever the curse was, it's still working on him."

Filius nodded, taking a step back from the bed. "As I said, high-level combat. A Cruciatus, with some kind of... of boost to it. It's not surprising Mr. Potter was overcome. Also, the room had been searched, Albus. Badly."

"And what of the weapon?" Dumbledore demanded.

Reaching onto the bedside table, Flitwick plucked up the small knife. "A standard potions knife, Albus. Every single student in the school has one of these. I've already checked. No skin traces, hair follicles or other identifying evidence."

Dumbledore swore, loudly and at length. Hermione raised an eyebrow at the language, before focussing on the important thing; Harry.

"Madam Pomfrey, you can help him, can't you?" She asked, a tremor in her voice.

Poppy looked up, her face blank. "I don't know, Miss Granger. I don't know... the damage is severe. These appear to be yesterday's clothes."

"Which suggests he's been unconscious all night." Hermione concluded.

"The stasis charm will be able to keep him alive as it is." Poppy informed her. "It's basically a null-field of space and time. In effect, he's not currently existing. But, to heal this kind of damage..."

"Phoenix!" Hermione blurted. "Professor Dumbledore, you have a phoenix, don't you?"

Dumbledore nodded. "I do, Miss Granger. However, he's not in the best of conditions at the moment. He's due for a burning day in the next few weeks, and-"

"He can't cry healing tears in the run up to his burning day." Hermione completed. "Bloody marvellous." She sighed. "Is there any way to repair the damage to his heart while he's in stasis?"

Poppy shook her head slowly. "No. The stasis field will basically prevent any changes. He's safe in there, but it'll stop us from working on him."

Hermione turned to Luna. "Get Neville, Susan and Blaise. They need to know about this." As Luna departed, she turned to Pomfrey. "Will Legilimency penetrate the stasis spell?"

Poppy blinked for a moment. "That's a restricted art, Miss Granger."

Hermione just waved her hand. "Never mind that. Will Legilimency penetrate a stasis spell?"

"No." Dumbledore said, stepping forward. "However, if we were to reduce the stasis spell, weaken it, it may be possible. Harry's mind, however, is impenetrable. He asked me to test his shields, and I could not get through."

I don't intend to penetrate his shields. Hermione thought to herself. I intend to knock on the door, and see if he answers. "Understood, sir. Madam Pomfrey, if Harry was able to slow down his life processes, would that give you more time to work on him? A sort of... self-enforced stasis charm?"

Poppy shrugged. "In theory, yes. However, I've never encountered anyone with that kind of bio-control. In theory, if Harry could slow down his heart beat, it would give us a little more time to work on him. Also, we'd be able to administer blood replenishment potions."

Hermione nodded. "Harry can do this. He has more self-control than anyone I've ever seen." She pondered for a moment. "When the others get here, lower the stasis charm. We'll go into his mind. He'll trust us. We'll see if we can get you some internal help."

Hermione opened her eyes slowly, feeling herself floating in the void that was Harry's mind. There was something different this time, though. Instead of floating alone in space, she found herself staring at the massive ship-shaped object that was Harry's mindscape. It was listing to one side, a large gash in the centre bleeding out oxygen.

To her left, Susan floated, the nearest person of their friends to a healer, since it was what she wanted to do after completing Hogwarts. On her right was Neville, brought along in case they needed some muscle. Without bothering to wait for a reply, Hermione willed herself forward, passing through the now non-existent shields, knocking on the door. After a moment, it opened a crack, just big enough for her to get her fingers in, and pull. Neville was there a moment later, gently pushing her out of the way as he jammed his fingers in the crack and pulled the door open.

Once the gap was wide enough, Neville leaned back, allowing Hermione to head into the crack, Susan falling in behind her. After the trio was inside the small room, Neville quickly hauled the outer door back into place, before opening the inner door.

Instead of the brightly lit corridors they were used to, half of the lights were off, while the others sputtered.

“This must mean that he knows there’s damage to his body.” Hermione pointed out to the others. “Come on... let’s get to the control room. That’s probably where he’s hiding.”

The deck they were walking on was skewed, leading each of them to lean against the walls as they crept forward.

“Anyone else think this is probably one of the weirdest things we’ve done on a Thursday?” Susan asked, out of the blue.

“It probably is.” Hermione muttered under her breath. “God damn it, why is every door shut in here?”

“Containment protocols.” Harry’s voice sounded. “Designed to protect my mind even during a catastrophic emergency. Hang on...” The door to the bridge opened, revealing a whole array of battered consoles, and several of the Harry doppelgangers loitering.

“Harry!” Hermione squealed, wrapping the nearest figure in a hug.

“Hi, gorgeous.” The normally-attired Harry, the true Harry, replied. “It’s good to see you.”

“And you.” Hermione said sincerely. “Do you know what happened to you?”

Harry sighed. “My memories are a bit hazy. I was attacked by a disillusioned figure. Hit with me a Crucio and then stabbed me. I would hazard a suggestion that it was the Heir of Slytherin.”

Another Harry stepped forward, clad in a green jumpsuit. “The stab wound penetrated the heart. I managed to slow down the bleeding, and increase production of red blood cells, but I’m at a dangerously critical condition.”

Hermione cleared her throat. “Yeah... Madam Pomfrey had you under a stasis spell for a while, but she lowered it so we could come in here. Do you have any way of controlling your body?”

“Short answer; yes. Longer answer; for the most part.” Medical replied. “What does she need?”

“More time.” Susan said softly. “She believes that she can repair your heart, but it’ll take too long. By the time the damage has been sealed up, you’ll have...” She trailed off, not even wanting to mention it.

“Died?” The Harry in Hermione’s arms replied bluntly. “Yeah, we figured that part out. What would we need, Medical?”

“Draught of Living Death would work.” Medical replied. “It’d basically slow down the body down to almost suspension. One heartbeat per minute, respiration every hour. Do you know how long Poppy needs?”

“Probably a couple of hours.” Susan said. “She basically needs to repair the damage, accelerating the regrowth of the damaged tissues. The give you a couple of blood replenishment potions.”

“What about anti-Cruciatius?” Medical asked. “If untreated, that can cause-”

“Already done.” Susan interrupted. “It’ll take a bit of time to prepare the Draught. It’s not something that’s routinely kept at school. Too much chance of misuse.”

Harry looked up. “Make sure that Snape’s not the one to make it. I wouldn’t trust him not to make it so potent I’ll never wake up. Hermione, could you make it?”

She nodded slowly. “I think I could... but it’s a pretty complex potion, Harry. Snape would be able to do it better than I can..”

“You can do it, Hermione. We both know that.” Harry replied. “And I trust you. All the ingredients and a small lab are set up in the Box. You could make it in there, then bring it straight to the Hospital Wing. Once that’s done, Poppy can work on the surgery, and get everything squared away in time for dinner.”

“Men...” Hermione scoffed. “Always thinking with your stomachs.”

“Yeah.” Harry and Neville said in unison. “It’s what we do!”

Hermione leaned forward and pecked Harry on the cheek. “I’ll get right to work on that potion, Harry.” She was about to turn away, when Harry pulled her back, staring into her eyes before leaning forward slowly. She knew that he was being noble and gentle, but she wasn’t in the mood. She leaned towards him quickly, fusing her lips to his. A moment later, her small pink tongue pressed against his lips, making him gasp. She quickly surged forward, licking his tongue before they started to duel.

Both pulled back after a moment, panting. “I’ll see you soon, Harry.” Hermione promised, before stepping back.

The three interlopers vanished as they willed themselves out of Harry’s mindscape.

“Damn...” Harry muttered, seeing the smirking Medical doppelganger. “Shut it, you!”

Medical held up his hands, the smirk still in place. “True love... isn’t it grand?”

Harry nodded, before sobering. “I’d still love to know how the hell Ginny managed to get the drop on us.”

Tactical appeared out of nowhere. Fortunately, Harry knew his mind, and didn’t jump. “I have a few small ideas.”

“Do share.”

With a wry grin, Tactical said, “We both know that luck is a completely random factor. During our early years, we got lucky against Voldemort, even though he was far more powerful and trained than we were. Plus, we fell into the age-old trap of underestimating our adversary.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah... I never thought Ginny would have the power or skill to cast a Cruciatus.”

"It's been done for hundreds of years." Tactical said. "People have been casting that spell, regardless of power or ability." He sighed. "We were arrogant. We should have expected her to pull out all the stops. Then again, we know it's not her driving."

"But how's Voldemort managing to control her so early?" Harry asked. "I mean... it wasn't this bad the first time round... was it?"

"We just can't know." Tactical said. "Remember, we barely spoke to Ginny the first time until the end of third year, when we were spending time at the Burrow before the World Cup. She's never spoken of her time under the diary. From what we know, she doesn't remember it. It's possible it was this bad the first time round." With a combination sigh/shrug, Tactical carried on. "Also, with regards to the power, the Horcrux is carrying it's own portion of magic, since the core resides inside the soul. Combine the Horcrux and Ginny and it's a magical powerhouse."

Harry nodded. "Here's hoping Poppy's as good now as she was in the future." He blinked. "I'm fairly certain that sentence made more sense in my head."

"We're in your head." Medical replied with a smirk, ducking a swat from both Harry and Tactical.

Hermione opened her eyes, his senses reconnecting with her body. The stale, antiseptic smell of the hospital wing, the endless bright white paint... She sat up, staring at Pomfrey. "He wants the Draft of Living Death, Madam."

Dumbledore took a step back. "I will arrange for Severus to brew the potion immediately."

"No, sir." Hermione said firmly. "Harry specifically requested that Professor Snape not make the potion. He asked that I brew it instead."

Dumbledore frowned. "Miss Granger, Professor Snape is one of the foremost potions masters in the country. His skill is unrivalled. He'll be able to make a perfectly acceptable potion."

"No, sir." She said again. "Harry doesn't trust Professor Snape, sir, and neither do I. His actions towards Harry have been nothing short of criminal, and I will not allow him to proscribe medication to my boyfriend."

"Miss Granger, I assure you, I trust Severus and he-"

"That is your choice, sir." Hermione said firmly. "I, however, do not. And neither does Harry. I will make the potion, at Harry's request."

The Headmaster turned to Madam Pomfrey. "Poppy, surely you can understand the need for Severus to make any potions that Harry needs."

Poppy nodded. "I can understand the need, Albus." She saw the hurt look on Hermione's face, but didn't let it affect her. "However, the wishes of the patient take precedence over needs, sir. Mr. Potter is not mentally incapacitated, and has made his wishes clear. Miss Granger will make the potion that he requires."

Slumping slightly, Dumbledore shook his head. "I'm afraid I must insist, Madam Pomfrey. Harry is a student, and the school acts in loco parentis during term time. Professor Snape will make the potion."

"I will not administer it." Poppy said frostily. "The patient has requested Miss Granger, and that is the only potion I will administer." She drew her wand. "Now, sir... you are required to leave the Hospital Wing."

With a disappointed look, Dumbledore turned and headed out of the door, intent on heading to the dungeons and arranging for Severus to brew the potion.

"Quickly, Miss Granger." Poppy said, keeping her eye on the door. "Take Miss Bones and Mr. Longbottom and get brewing. If you need ingredients, come and see me, and I shall liaise with Professor Sprout."

Hermione grabbed Susan's and Neville's arms, and fled the hospital wing.

Collecting Luna, Padma and Blaise on route, Hermione headed straight for Harry's dorm-room, where the Box was ticking over.

"Er... doesn't this thing have defences?" Blaise asked, grabbing hold of Hermione's arm as she reached for the door.

"I'm keyed in." Hermione replied, pulling free and pressing her hand to the magi-lock. After a moment, the door opened with a creak. The box was still dark on the inside, the toiling bell sounding in the cavernous room.

"Okay... this ain't creepy." Susan said, shuddering slightly.

"Come on." Neville pushed forward. "Potions lab's just back there."

As they rushed forward, Hermione stopped at the console, her hand snaking out and flicking two switches unconsciously. The bell ended on the first flick, while the lights came on thanks to the second.

"How'd you know how to do that?" Neville asked, stopping in his tracks.

"I have no idea." Hermione admitted, blinking in confusion. "It's almost like... like it wanted me to." She shook her head. "Doesn't matter. Need to get this potion made."

Quickly finding ingredients, water and a cauldron, Hermione set the water to boil before adding ingredients. "Blaise, you've got a cool and logical mind." She said casually. "What do you make of this?"

Blaise paused from his chopping of the wormwood. "I can see several possibilities." He admitted after a moment, resuming his chopping. "First, one of the students didn't believe Harry's declaration that he isn't the Heir of Slytherin, and attempted to stop the attacks themselves."

Hermione nodded from her bench, where she was grinding root of asphodel. "Logical. But, Professor Flitwick said there were high-level curses thrown about, including the Cruciatus. That implies an older, more powerful student."

"Agreed." Blaise said. "Another possibility is that someone broke into the school, believing the same thing. Unlikely, considering Hogwarts is supposed to be secure."

"'Supposed'." Padma sniffed. She was grinding moonstone powder. "Yeah, wasn't Voldemort here last year?"

"Yes." The other five agreed in unison.

"You're forgetting the most obvious." Luna said from the other side of the bench, where she was sterilising stirring rods. "The Heir of Slytherin wanted to get Harry out of the way. Since we now know that Slytherin's monster is a Basilisk, and Harry's a Parselmouth, they may have wanted to get him out of the way."

Hermione paused her actions, looking up at Luna. "How accurate's your gift, Luna?"

"No, I don't know who it is." Luna replied. "My gift seems to mainly focus on ripples in time. I can't see who it is that is carrying out these actions, unfortunately."

Sighing, Hermione carried on. "What else do we know?"

Neville cleared his throat. He'd been washing beakers in the small sink. "We know that the Chamber of Secrets is not a myth. It's real. And the 'monster' inside is a Basilisk, the king of serpents. We know that there is a human behind the actions, although we don't know who that human is. We know that they must consider Harry a threat, since he's the only Parselmouth in the school." He corrected himself. "The only other Parselmouth in the school."

"How's it getting round?" Susan asked, out of the blue, looking up from the textbook containing the instructions. "I mean... Basilisks, as

the 'king' of serpents, have to be bloody big. How else is it going to move around the school?"

"A good question." Hermione said. "Blaise, you got that wormwood ready?"

Passing across his chopping board, Blaise folded his hands together. "The other way, Hermione. Add the wormwood first." He took a moment to think. "Another question we can ask is 'how did this person gain access to Harry's dormitory?' Granted, the password system isn't infallible, but the portrait would have remembered someone else coming in, surely?"

"Yeah... Flitwick already asked him." Hermione replied absently, stirring the wormwood water. "Damn, I hate mysteries. Do you reckon Harry knows?"

No-one had an answer.

The potion was completed and delivered to Madam Pomfrey in short order. Once administered, she began work on repairing the damage.

While working, Poppy's mind raced. It's not right. She groused. The poor lad's had more trouble and strife in his twelve years than anyone else has faced in a life-time. Only Alastor Moody can come close to matching Harry's suffering...

She ran her wand down Harry's chest, neatly slicing through the skin, which she carefully peeled back. Another flick of her wand removed two of Harry's ribs, which plopped casually into a kidney-shaped bowl that was lying on the tool table next to her.

Finally, she could see it. The heart. It was twitching slightly, the Draught of Living Death slowing his body to an amazing degree. One of the chambers had been pierced all the way through, which would require some seriously deep healing on her part.

It's been a while since I've had to do this. She thought to herself, as she gingerly pushed her wand inside the rupture, and began to cast muscle-knitting spells slowly.

In the waiting room, Hermione Granger sat, chewing her fingernails down to the bed. She'd read up on magical medicine, of course, before she began attending Hogwarts. What she'd read had absolutely fascinated her. They were able to do so much!

In the Muggle world, you had to be anaesthetised, scrubbed and cut open to remove an faulty appendix. In the magical world, you took a potion, and had an uncomfortable bowel movement... and that was it! Broken bones could be put back together with a flick of a wand, destroyed bones could be removed and replaced overnight... It was a marvel.

However, stab wounds, serious stab wounds, required a little more work. It was necessary to repair each cluster of muscles, before regrowing the nerves. It was a lot of work, and was guaranteed to be extremely painful.

She was still pondering the cause of this attack. Granted, Harry was the 'Boy-Who-Lived', not to mention rich, powerful and handsome, but the sheer ferocity of the attack, not to mention the timing, was certainly a cause for concern.

Why now? She wondered. True, the Heir of Slytherin is attempting to attack Muggleborns, but what made them pick this time to stab Harry? A scary thought crossed her mind. Is it possible that the Heir has access to some of Harry's knowledge? Or worse, a Seer like Luna on their side?

She sighed. Introspection was all well and good, but she needed Harry awake before any answers could be gotten. Her eyes drifted to the waiting room doors.

Blaise was a cool, rational young man. Gifted, by many standards. But he was terrified out of his mind at the prospect that someone could calmly attack Harry. He'd only known the Ravenclaw for a year, but in even that limited time, he'd been impressed with how capable Harry was. If something could just sneak into Harry's dorms and near-kill him... What the hell chance do the rest of us have?

As a Slytherin, he knew an assassination attempt when he saw one. This wasn't even a warning. If it wasn't for Harry's truly impressive bio-control, he would have been dead for hours by the time they were found.

And that was another thing; how exactly did the attacker manage to penetrate all the security of Hogwarts? How did they manage to leave no traces of skin or hair on the weapon? How did they manage to use high-intensity Dark combat magicks in the school, without the Headmaster being notified?

He sighed. Introspection was all well and good, but he needed Harry awake before any answers could be gotten. His eyes drifted to the waiting room doors.

Padma sat next to Susan, clutching her hand. She'd never seen so much blood before! The prospect was like a blast of cold water to the face. Yes, she knew that Voldemort had near-ruled the country with a wave of terror just before she was born, but this...

It made it all real to her. She'd pledged with Harry to fight, but like all children, she didn't really understand the concept of fighting. To her, it was duelling, except with slightly more dangerous spells. Two opponents would fire spells at each other until one was down. The prospect of death, disease and destruction never occurred to her.

She realised, with a bit of morbid satisfaction, that she was better for this experience. Harry would live, they knew that now. But, she had received her 'trial by fire' in helping a dying friend. She knew what to expect the next time there was a fight, and she was better for it.

Like Hermione and Blaise, she was concerned over the timing and nature of the attack, but was prepared to wait for more information. Like the others, though, she had questions.

She sighed. Introspection was all well and good, but she needed Harry awake before any answers could be gotten. Her eyes drifted to the waiting room doors.

Susan had seen blood before. Indeed, since her Aunt was the Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, she'd come home several times injured and covered in blood. Seeing a close friend (practically a brother) dying on a stone cold floor in front of her had still shocked her.

Growing up the way she had, with an Aunt since both her parents were killed in the first war with Voldemort, she had been a very lonely child. Sure, she'd made a few friends as she grew up, notably Hannah Abbott, but she was never an open, outgoing person...

Until she met Harry. He'd breezed into her life courtesy of a marriage proposal. Instead of teasing her, as almost every other eleven year old boy would do, he told her honestly (and politely, another first) that he wasn't looking. Then he'd included her in his circle of friends, immediately dragging her into an adventure with a wayward dragon.

He'd been supportive, kind and friendly to a girl who at the time, frankly, wasn't worth cleaning dung off his shoes. He'd raised her confidence and abilities to an extremely high degree. Most notably... he didn't do anything extraordinary. For him, anyway. He just made her a better person.

And now, someone had attacked him. She knew she should send a letter to her Aunt, since a brutal attack of this nature really did require the attention of the Aurors, but she wanted to wait until Harry was awake, to find out what she should do.

She sighed. Introspection was all well and good, but she needed Harry awake before any answers could be gotten. Her eyes drifted to the waiting room doors.

Neville, like the others, was concerned.

Like most magical children raised in the 1980s, he'd been indoctrinated in the belief that Hogwarts school was an impenetrable safe haven, especially with Dumbledore there. An attack like this, considering that Harry was the Lord of an Ancient and Noble House, was truly terrifying.

Whoever the attacker was had managed to either get into the school, or even scarier, was already a member of that school, a fact that was enough to drive the old Neville out of his mind.

But Neville wasn't that scared, timid little squirt anymore. Ever since the trip out with Harry, where the annoying bastard had pushed Neville beyond his comfort, he'd been far more. He'd gained confidence, when he realised that he truly was a wizard, not a weak little squib. Harry's methods of gaining that knowledge were uncomfortable, true, but the result was worth it.

Unknown to most people, Neville knew that his mother was actually Harry's godmother, while Lily was his. Both he and Harry had been robbed of their true childhoods, and were both loners growing up. Harry was turning out to be the big brother Neville had yearned for all his life, even though he was actually a day younger.

Harry's confidence, poise and knowledge rubbed off on Neville, making him want to improve himself, especially considering their rocky start. He'd been following Ron Weasley around, since the family were confirmed light-wizards, but Ron's attitude had disgusted him. Harry had generously given him a second chance, and he intended to make certain that the banner of Longbottom once again flew alongside Potter.

But what could do something like this to a powerhouse like Harry? Especially with something as utterly mundane as a potions knife?

He sighed. Introspection was all well and good, but he needed Harry awake before any answers could be gotten. His eyes drifted to the waiting room doors.

The last of the six in the waiting room was Luna, and she was puzzled. Her gift of the Sight (not confusing it with Trelawney's short-sight) had never failed her to this degree. Why hadn't she seen such an immense change in the time-line?

She sighed to herself. Harry was a nexus point in space and time, she knew that for certain. Not to mention his actions were affecting near-everything. But to miss something so big...

Because of her gift, she was able to view certain moments from the original time-line, the one that Harry had neatly destroyed when he'd taken his Quantum Leap. In that time-line, Luna Lovegood had been a friendless loser, retreating too far into herself, and never managing to come back. She'd died in battle, not taking it seriously enough.

But as soon as she'd met Harry this time, he'd gone out of his way to befriend her. He hadn't known about her gift of the sight, not really. He knew that she was different, but he seemed to relish her differences as unique, instead of thinking her a freak. She was truly free to be herself with him, and that puzzled her.

He didn't want anything from anyone. Well, that wasn't strictly true. He wanted them all to become capable. He had no ulterior motives in gathering his friends. He'd simply accepted them as they came calling, of which Blaise was a prime example.

With her, though, he didn't expect her to use her gift to improve things. He didn't expect her to see what he wanted. He simply wanted her to grow into herself. And she was. The future she saw for herself was so different. She would be powerful, able to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. She had a gift that would be used to help others.

But, there were bad things coming, things even she couldn't predict. She'd need Harry's help, as well as the help of the rest of her friends. And she knew that she'd be standing by Harry's side through it all. Along with Hermione, Blaise, Susan, Padma and Neville.

Who had attacked him? She couldn't see the answer to that question. Oh, she knew that Ginny was carrying around a Dark magic item, true. She knew that she could try and take the blasted book. But that could have an inverse reaction on history. Future history.

She sighed. Introspection was all well and good, but she needed Harry awake before any answers could be gotten. Her eyes drifted to the waiting room doors.

Ginny Weasley blinked. She looked down at herself, wondering how the hell she'd gotten back to her dorm room, when the last thing she

remembered was leaving Potions. She sat up in her bed, pondering the situation. This wasn't the first time she'd had a memory fade-out, and it was making her nervous.

She quickly grabbed her diary, and inked a quill.

Hey, Tom.

After a few moments, the diary wrote back.

Hello, Ginny. How are you today?

Nervous.

Oh? Why?

I... I've had another memory block.

Another one? So soon? What's the last thing you remember?

Ginny nibbled on her bottom lip as she thought.

I was leaving Potions, and my bag handle snapped. The next thing I know, I'm waking up in my dorm room. I don't know how I got here, or anything.

There was a pause for a moment, before the diary wrote back.

Is anything missing?

Ginny made a quick search of her dorm and bag, spotting nothing out of the ordinary.

Not that I can tell.

If it were me, and I was having black-outs like this, I'd probably run a few medical diagnostic charms on myself. Just to make sure. You never know what could have happened to you. Are you familiar with the spell?

I know the basic health charm. Mum taught me when I was younger.

Then cast it, Ginny. Better to be safe than sorry.

Nodding, Ginny pulled her wand and cast the charm. The results floated in the air for a moment, revealing that she was in perfect health.

It says I'm fine.

There is another spell, used for verifying your purity. It might be worth using that.

Ginny was familiar with that spell. It was something her mother cast on her brothers every time they came home from Hogwarts, and she knew that she'd be added to the roster when she returned. It was a status check for virginity. With a sigh, she cast the charm. She grinned to herself.

No, I'm still... intact. I don't know what to do, Tom.

There was another pause.

If it was me, I'd write down all the times you've had these 'black-outs'. Maybe there's a pattern. Maybe it's after you're exposed to certain Potions ingredients, or maybe even something as simple as one of the caretaker's cleaning products. You never know.
That's a good idea, Tom. Thanks.

She grabbed a piece of parchment, and began writing.

Inside the diary, a malevolent presence chortled to itself. Soon, you stupid little girl, you'll realise the truth. And then it will be too late. Without Potter around, there shall be none who can stop me... except, possibly, Dumbledore. Hmm... I'll need to get the old fart out of the school in order to be successful.

Soon... It thought. Soon...

In his office, Dumbledore was nearly crapping razor blades. His concern over the attacks was greater than anything he'd felt in a long time.

If Harry dies now... He could barely complete the thought. If Harry dies now, who will defeat Voldemort when he returns? He is the only one that is capable of destroying that monster.

Fawkes sang soothingly from his perch, but the noise wasn't nearly as comforting as usual.

How did someone cast a Cruciatus curse within the school, and I didn't know? This was another point that was bothering him. The wards of the school reported to him and him alone, and the fact that someone could casually cast Unforgiveable curses was more than a little disturbing.

Why didn't Hogwarts tell me?

He glanced at his watch, noting that Poppy had been operating on the boy for a good long while by now.

Another thing... why did Poppy side with Miss Granger? She knows that Severus is an expert potion maker. True, his grudge against James Potter is still very much alive and well and aimed at Harry, but he is a professional. It's almost as though they don't trust him. He sighed. He'd done as much as he could to protect Severus Snape. They know that he has my full confidence, even though he's been very childish with regards to Harry. That should be more than enough.

Live, damn you, Harry. Live. You are needed by the world.

Poppy sighed to herself as she ran her wand down Harry's chest, sealing up the two large flaps of skin. After almost nine hours of gently poking and prodding, she'd managed to seal the hole in his heart. His recovery wasn't complete, though. He still had a number of nerve regeneration potions to take, not to mention time to rest.

She went to the sink and washed her hands, scrubbing the blood off, before she cast a sterilisation charm on them. Going over to the potions supply cupboard, she pulled out several vials of a thick, mud-like potion. Holding her nose, she flicked off the stopper, pouring one down Harry's throat, before adding a second, then a third. Stroking his throat to induce swallowing, she casually vanished the vials, before looking down at her patient.

"What am I going to do with you?" She asked softly. "You're going to keep getting hurt, aren't you?"

She reached up, brushing some of his unruly hair away from his head.

"You get better." She said, smiling at him, before heading to the doors to the waiting room.

"I've finished." The words penetrated six sets of ears, as Harry's friends jumped to their feet and rushed to the doors.

Once inside the hospital wing, they quickly grabbed chairs and set up a vigil around Harry's bedside.

"He looks so pale." Susan whispered. She was set next to Harry's waist on the right hand side, with Neville to her left, sitting next to Harry's head, while Luna was on her right, resting a hand on Harry's knee. On the other side, Hermione had taken Harry's hand, while Blaise was across from Luna, Padma sitting across from Neville.

"He lost a lot of blood." Poppy said from the bottom of the bed. "I've sealed up the holes and repaired the damage, but he'll be bed-ridden for at least a week, and dreadfully weak for almost a month."

"No, he won't." The six chimed in unison. "You watch." Hermione continued. "He'll be out of bed within the next few days, and back to full strength within a fortnight." She snorted softly. "He won't let it be any other way."

On board a ship in a place that only existed in a mind, Medical grinned. "It's done. All systems are showing green. We're back and as good as new."

Harry nodded. "Excellent. Am I gonna be in pain when I wake up?"

Medical nodded. "Probably a little bit, yeah. Still, pain's good, innit? Means you're still alive. Now, get your lazy arse up there."

Harry's eyes fluttered open slowly, a groan building in his chest. Hermione was staring at him, the concern in those cinnamon orbs enough to send what little blood he had left in his body racing southwards. "Mornin'..." He slurred. "You look good..."

Hermione blushed prettily, before pressing a chaste kiss to his lips. "You scared the crap out of me!" She scolded.

The sounds of the Evil Queen of medicine approaching scuppered any conversational opportunities. "So, you're awake." Poppy said, smirking nastily. "Oh, I have some absolutely vile potions for you to drink."

Harry stared at her for a moment. "Love you too, Poppy."

Blushing like a school girl, Pomfrey ran several quick diagnostics. While she worked, she spoke. "You know, when you said you missed me, you didn't need to come in as a customer. I'd happily have had a cup of tea with you."

"Wanted to prove it." Harry said, wincing as he moved slightly. "I assume that you fixed the ragged hole in my chest?"

"Of course." Poppy replied, sounding scandalised at the impugning of her work, however inferred. "It took me a long time, too. I'd like to make a request."

He nodded, biting down on his lip as another wave of pain washed over him.

"Don't get stabbed again. It's rather... irritating, trying to stitch you up."

"No promises." Harry half-laughed, half-wincing.

"Harry!" Hermione snapped. "Don't joke about things like that!"

I wish I was joking. Harry reached up to take her hand. "I'm sorry, Hermione. It's just... it's that whole 'if I don't laugh, I'll cry' bit. I didn't mean to scare you."

"How're you feeling?" Hermione asked tenderly.

Harry took a deep breath, wincing slightly as he felt another wave of pain in his chest. "Oddly enough, pretty lousy. But, a lot better."

“Good.” Poppy said, handing him a vial of Blood Replenishing potion. “Drink this. You shouldn’t need too much, but this should be enough to help you feel a little better.”

Harry took the potion, swallowing slowly until he felt the strange gagging sensation that told him he’d had enough. He passed the half-full vial back to Poppy, who nodded. “So, what did I miss? How long have I been unconscious, anyway?”

“Approximately thirty hours.” Hermione said. “You spent the first few of those unconscious on your dorm floor. We found you in the morning when you didn’t come down for breakfast. I went up to your dorm-room, and found the place messed up.”

“Anything missing?” Harry asked instantly.

“Not that I could tell.” Hermione said, her eyes narrowing. “Your trunk was destroyed and a couple of school books had been ripped up, but nothing major. I know you keep most of your important stuff inside the ship, and only you and I can get in there, so...”

“Yeah.” Harry nodded absently. Bugger... the Horcrux has gone then. Shit... Ginny must have it back in her possession by now. “Any more attacks while I was out?”

“No, nothing. Harry, do you know who it was who stabbed you?”

“They were disillusioned.” Harry replied. “I couldn’t see their face. And they spoke in Parseltongue.”

Hermione nodded. “Which means you didn’t hear a voice. Any guesses?”

“Not at the present time.” Harry replied. Since I already know who it was. “So, you found me on the dorm floor. What then?”

Poppy wandered over to listen in while she ran a few more diagnostic charms.

“Well, I sent Padma to find Professor Flitwick and Luna to get Madam Pomfrey. We moved you onto your bed and portkeyed the whole thing to the Hospital Wing.”

Harry nodded. “Makes sense. You couldn’t really carry me with a knife in my chest, and you couldn’t remove it without causing me to bleed out.” He grinned. “I love magic.”

“Ah, you’re awake, Mr. Potter.” Dumbledore’s voice came from the doorway.

Instantly schooling his face to impassiveness, Harry looked over. “Good... is it morning?” He asked. “Good day, Headmaster. You’re looking well.”

“Thank you, my boy. And yes, it is morning.” Dumbledore glanced down at his watch. “For another twelve minutes, at least. Are you feeling better?”

Harry nodded. “It’s remarkable just how good not having a hole in your chest can feel, sir. Any news on my attacker?”

“Alas, nothing.” Dumbledore said. “I was hoping that you’d be able to provide us with some additional information regarding the attack. What can you tell me?”

“Practically nothing useful, sir.” Harry replied dutifully. “The figure was disillusioned, meaning I couldn’t see their face, and they only spoke in Parseltongue, so I couldn’t even hear a voice. They did hit me with a Cruciatus, which completely knocked me off guard.”

Dumbledore nodded sadly. “Yes... Professor Flitwick reported that. I’m sorry you had to undergo such a thing, Harry.” He sighed heavily. “In that case, we are no further along in our investigation than we were before. There were no skin traces of follicles. No fingerprints on the attacking weapon. Nothing that can be used to tie it down to any particular person.”

“What about Priori Incantatum, sir?” Hermione asked. “Surely that could be used.”

Dumbledore's eyebrow shot up. "Indeed, Miss Granger. That's a rather obscure bit of knowledge."

"I like to read." Hermione said with a blush.

"Unfortunately, Priori Incantatum can only reveal the last few spells on a wand. If someone is in the know, and I believe that several people here at the school know about it, then it's next to useless. Simple charms, such as a Leviosa or even a simply personal grooming charm, can clear a wand. Unforgiveable curses have a way of lingering on a wand, which could be detected, but after this length of time, the trail will undoubtedly be cold."

"So... back to square one, with a potential murderer walking round the school." Harry replied, sighing. "Very well, sir. Can I ask that if you do get more information, that I be notified?"

"Of course, Harry. Any pertinent information will be shared with you in due time." Dumbledore nodded, before heading out of the door.

"And who the hell decides what's 'pertinent'?" Hermione muttered under her breath. "Harry, are you sure you want to..." She trailed off as she looked up at Poppy. "Er..."

"I understand, Miss Granger." Poppy replied softly. "I, too, have issues with Albus sometimes."

Harry nodded. "I'll play nice with him." He said slowly. "But I'll never trust him again. Not after what's he done."

"Understandable." Poppy said.

"Well..." Hermione sighed. "You did say 'no second chances'."

Again, Harry nodded. "Poppy, you mind if I get up? I've got an immensely full bladder here."

Poppy sighed and handed him a robe.

Less than a day later saw Harry on his knees in front of Pomfrey, his friends stood by the door laughing their arses off.

“No.” Poppy said flatly.

“Oh, come on!” Harry grumbled. “Discounting the fact that I feel much better, I’m bored out of my mind here!”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“I’ll pay you.”

“I get paid by the school.”

“I’ll pay you more.”

“I get paid enough.”

“I’ve give you an extremely expensive present.”

“No.”

“I’ll get you two extremely expensive presents!”

“No.”

“I’ll run away and tell everyone you were torturing me!”

“Do so.”

“Please!”

“No.”

Poppy was enjoying herself immensely.

Harry decided to bring out the big guns. He opened his eyes wide, and let his bottom lip quiver pathetically. As usual, Poppy couldn't resist the Potter charm, combined with a puppy-dog pout.

"Fine." She sighed. "It's on your head. Come back if you feel any weakness."

Harry shot to his feet, wrapping the startled matron in a hug. "Cheers, Poppy." He pressed a kiss to her cheek, and bolted for the bathroom to get changed.

Poppy's hand raised up to her cheek, which was glowing with embarrassment. She glanced over at the six laughing students. "Oh, be quiet!"

Once free from the lair of the Evil Queen of Medicine, Harry cheered up. "God, I hate the hospital wing. Don't get me wrong; I like Poppy, and I like that she's so good at her job... I just wish I didn't have to sit in there so bloody often."

Hermione had linked arms with him while they walked away, and pulled him into a hug. "We're all glad you're feeling better, Harry." She said softly, looking into his eyes. The other five turned away, not wanting to intrude on such a clearly private moment.

"Thanks, Hermione." Harry said, equally softly.

"Ah, Potter. Not dead yet?" Malfoy's hated voice boomed up the corridor.

Harry growled in his throat for a moment, before looking up. "No, not yet, Ferret. You'll have to wait a little longer for that."

"It's no skin off my nose, Potter." Malfoy said airily.

"It's odd that you were so concerned, Bad Faith." Harry said. "Then again, even with me in the Hospital Wing unconscious, I'm still better at Quidditch than you are." Flipping Malfoy the bird, the group walked past.

“Actually, that reminds me.” Harry said. “I must have missed a couple of practices with the team.”

“Oh, that reminds me.” Padma said. “Davies said he needed to talk to you about something.”

“Okay.” Harry replied. “I’ll go and find him later.”

Two hours later, Harry came into the Ravenclaw common room, where the others had gathered.

“You find Roger?” Hermione asked, not looking up from her homework.

“Yep.” Harry said shortly.

“And?”

“And I won’t be playing Quidditch anymore.” Harry replied, sitting on the couch next to Hermione.

“Oh? Why?” Neville asked.

“Because until the whole Chamber of Secrets mess is cleared up, the Ravenclaw team feel that having a potential Dark wizard on the team is a scandal they hope to avoid.” Harry replied bitterly. “Cho Chang will be playing as seeker until further notice.”

Hermione’s face grew red as a towering inferno of anger built up. “Are they out of their bloody minds?” She hissed furiously.

“Hermione.” Harry said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Let it go.”

“This is wrong!” Hermione snapped. “God damn it, Harry, you know that!”

“It’s only Quidditch.” Harry replied. “I still have my broom. Besides, at the risk of sounding arrogant, Cho’s not as good a seeker as I am. And when this mess gets cleared up, I won’t go back.”

Luna chuckled evilly. "Oh, I don't think they have any idea what they've done." She let out a vicious cackle. "It's a shame that Davies is too blind to see it."

Said team captain chose that moment to enter the common room. He looked over at the sofas near the fireplace and cringed.

"Ah, Davies." Hermione said brusquely as she stood up. "I'd like a word with you."

"Hermione." Harry said, reaching up to grab her arm, only to have it shaken off.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're playing at?"

"With what?" Roger asked, clearly scared of the little girl.

"Why have you banned Harry from the team?"

Roger looked at Harry, who shrugged as he put his feet onto the coffee table, leaning back. "I-I told Potter. Until the scandal's cleared up, it's better for the team if he doesn't play."

"Oh. I see." Hermione snarled. "Even though Harry already told everyone who the Heir of Slytherin is? Even though you should know him better than this? Even though we're going to lose now that Chang's the seeker?" Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Do you have any explanation for your stupidity?"

Roger drew himself up to his not inconsiderable full height. "I'm the team captain, Granger. If I make a decision for the good of the team, that decision stands. Besides, when the scandal's cleared up, we'll allow Potter to come back, nothing else said. It's not permanent."

Harry scoffed, but didn't say anything.

"Your loss, Davies." Hermione said icily. "I just hope you realise what you've lost."

Author's Note: There is a very simple reason I've banned Harry from playing Quidditch: I can't write a Quidditch match to save my life, and they kinda bore me in the books. Besides, the Sock Quidditch is more interesting, especially if you write it in the 'Statler and Waldorf' way.

Another Author's Note: Why is it you never see people coming back from the toilet in movies? I mean, it's one of the most common things that people do, yet it never happens. I'm a big Star Trek fan, and you never see anyone running out of the bathroom gagging, yelling "Do not go in there!" I wonder why that is...

– CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE –

Ding, Dong, Merrily on High

“What do you guys have planned for Christmas this year?” Harry asked, out of the blue. It seemed almost... strange, that he wasn’t planning an excursion into the Slytherin common room this time around. Then again, he knew exactly who the Heir was, and he knew there wouldn’t be any attacks over Christmas, so it wasn’t really a big worry.

“Er...” There were general mumbles. Hermione went first. “Nothing this year, Harry. I think my parents wanted you to come to us this year. Why, do you have plans?”

He grinned at her. “I’ve got something in mind, yes.”

“My family usually returns to Italy during the holiday period.” Blaise spoke up. “We see the rest of the Zabini clan. I’m afraid I can’t avoid it.”

“No problem, Blaise.” Harry said in a tightly-controlled voice. “I understand how important family is.”

“I’m staying at school.” Luna said, breaking the sudden silence. “Daddy’s off on an expedition this year.”

Hermione glanced at Harry, before nodding. “I’m sure you can come with us, Luna.” She offered to the strange little girl.

“Thank you.”

“Me and Parvati are going home as well. Father insists we spend our time with our relatives back east.”

Neville just shrugged. “Just me and my Gran. Other than my usual appointment on Christmas morning, I’ve got nothing planned.”

“Me and Auntie Amelia spend our holidays together. We’re about the only family either has left.”

Harry took a moment to think. "Well... why don't you and your Gran, Neville, and you and your Aunt, Sue, come with me and the Grangers? Assuming that Hermione's parents want to? I can put you all up and feed you, and I do have a devious little plan. Luna, you're welcome to come too, of course."

She nodded, smiling at him. "Thank you, Harry."

"I think my parents would be okay, Harry. What are we gonna be doing?"

"It's a surprise."

"Your flat won't fit all these extra people, Harry."

"I know."

"Er... sorry to interrupt, Harry, but I doubt I can get my Gran to agree. We have a... a ritual, that we perform on Christmas morning. I won't put it off."

"I understand, Neville." Harry said supportively. "I know what it is, and I'll make sure that you're there to see them. I've recently found out where mine are, and I'll want to visit them, too."

Neville's eyes widened dramatically as he realised what Harry was actually saying. "I... I never knew..."

"No-one does." Harry said coolly. "No-one ever told me where they were." He shook his head. "Anyway... I think a nice little holiday can be arranged. And more importantly, look at it from another perspective; no need to clean up the carnage!"

"Sold." Susan replied instantly. "I'll persuade Auntie to come along, too. She loves Christmas, but hates having to do any of the work towards it."

After the group had filed out, Hermione scooted closer to Harry. "What was that?"

Harry glanced round, making sure the two were alone, before leaning in closer. "I finally found out where my parents were buried. It took a bit of time and research, but I found it."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. There's a small cemetery, not far from where my parents' cottage was." Harry said softly. "Mum and Dad are buried in there. I've never actually been." And it was true; he hadn't. During the original timeline, Voldemort had been doing everything he could to demoralise Harry, which included putting the entire Godric's Hollow graveyard under a Fidelius, learning the Secret, and then killing the Secret Keeper. Harry had never been able to go. This time, he would.

"So, you're going this year." Hermione said. It wasn't a question.

"Yep. Christmas morning, I plan to take the Box to Godric's Hollow. Lay a few flowers on the graves, you know?"

"I-If you don't mind, I'll come with you." Hermione offered gently.

"I'd like that."

Susan, Neville, Luna and Hermione had sent their letters off later that same day. The replies came pretty quickly.

"My Gran said 'yes', Harry." Neville reported one morning during breakfast. "As long as we can go and see Mum and Dad on Christmas morning, we're fine."

Hermione had also received a reply. "Mum and Dad are fine with it, Harry. They want to know if they're picking us up from the station again."

Harry shook his head. "I have a devious idea about what to do, Hermione. If you could ask them to pack for either hot or cold weather, and then take a train to King's Cross, we'll be able to go straight from there. Same for you, Neville. We'll be heading to either a rather warm place, or a rather cold one."

Susan came up, clutching a piece of parchment. "Auntie says that's fine, but as the Director of MLE, she may be on call, and may need to rush back."

"Understood." Harry said. "And that's fine. The Box can take us anywhere on the planet within a couple of hours, so it shouldn't be a problem."

"Cool." Susan sat down, and began helping herself to breakfast.

"So, I was thinking either the Rocky Mountains, in Canada, or Florida beach." Harry said casually. "The Rockies are supposed to be really nice during winter. Cold as hell, but really nice. We could set up a nice fire pit and have barbecues. Same for Florida."

Hermione pondered for a moment. "I think the Rockies. It's winter, and it's supposed to be cold. I think having Christmas on a beach would be... weird."

"I agree." Neville and Susan said together.

"Okay." Harry nodded. "Where's Luna?"

"The Rockies." Luna said, from just behind Harry's ear. Hermione, Susan and Neville jumped as the blonde seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

"Bonus." Harry said. "Looks like it's the Rockies, then."

The last few days of school were a bit of a piss take, really. No-one (bar Snape) was in the mood to work, and that attitude was clearly reflected in everyone. Even most of the teachers 'failed' to assign holiday homework (again, bar Snape... bloody Scrooge).

On Friday, 18th December, school let out. Just before he left his dorm, Harry entered his Portkey box, and began to set co-ordinates and a timer. The Box should (in theory) materialise on platform 9¾ almost the exact same time as the train arrived.

Augusta Longbottom, Amelia Bones and the Grangers would be meeting the youths there, and they would all set off for their holiday together. Harry had no real reason to return to his flat, except to attend to the damned Venomous Tentacular Neville had given him for his birthday six months ago. And considering it was under a stasis charm, and could survive for years without trying to kill him, he didn't see a need.

Hedwig had been getting more and more excited about the holidays, something that confused Harry. He didn't think she really understood about Christmas. Then again, she could read books and dance, so Harry didn't bother trying to work it out.

"You looking forward to the holiday season, Hed'?" Harry asked to his familiar, who was sitting on the head of his bed. She snuffled happily. "Yeah, me too. Anything you want?"

Again, a snuffle, with a short bark. "I shouldn't really feed you live mice, dear." Harry said slowly. "Besides, you catch them yourself."

Hedwig gave him what could only be described as a pout. "Fine." Harry sighed. "I'll get you some mice." Hedwig barked in gratitude, before hopping neatly into her cage.

"One day, I swear she'll transform in front of me..." He muttered, as he picked up the cage and his lightened trunk.

Everything was a blur as the seven students gathered in a compartment. It was a bit of a tight fit, but instead of expanding the compartment, Hermione solved the issue by sitting in Harry's lap. Both of them were blushing, but neither wanted to break the moment.

"So..." Padma coughed after a moment. "Anything else interesting happen with regards to Davies, Harry?"

"Nope." Harry replied casually. "I told him that I was done. If they want me off the team just to stop a scandal... well, it's their loss."

"Actually, it could be yours." Blaise said. "I mean, Quidditch scouts often attend our games in secret, and it's possible, since you are the

youngest player in a century, that you'd be drafted. If you're not playing, then you run the risk of not being spotted."

"True." Harry admitted. "But, there's something you're missing, Blaise."

"Oh?" An eyebrow shot up. "And what's that?"

"I don't particularly enjoy Quidditch. Yeah, it's okay as something to do on a warm Saturday afternoon, but it's not my life. If I don't get to play..." He shrugged. "Besides, it makes Davies look like a complete and total arsehole for kicking me off the team. When the truth comes out about the Heir of Slytherin, and believe me, the truth will come out, it always does, he'll look even more foolish."

"Vicious." Blaise said. "I approve."

"I still think you're wrong to just let that go, Harry." Hermione said into his neck.

"Hermione, it's fine." He whispered soothingly. "Besides, the more time I spent practicing Quidditch is less time I could be spending with you."

She smiled. "I'll let you off, then."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am." Harry mocked.

"Harry?"

"Yes, Sue?"

"Did you ask Tonks if she wants to come and spend Christmas with us?"

"I did." Harry replied. "She's spending it with her Mum and Dad this year. She said to drop by her parents' place sometime to swap gifts, so I figured we'd do that just before New Years."

"Do you have all your shopping done?" Hermione asked.

"Nope. Need to do that before we go." Harry replied. "Also, need to stock up on food, too. Feeding nine people for two weeks, especially Christmas Dinner, can involve quite a lot."

"Oh... do you need a 'contribution'?" Susan asked.

"Nah. I'll just need to do a big food shop." He clicked his fingers. "Actually, Hermione, you and your parents better come with me. Somehow, I just can't see the Director of the MLE pushing a shopping trolley with a wonky wheel round Asda." He looked at Susan. "You know... I've never actually asked; where do witches and wizards go food shopping?"

Susan looked down. "As a rule... we don't. We send out our House Elves to do it for us."

"Oh..." Harry nodded slowly. "But, what about those people who don't have House Elves? You know, half-bloods and Muggleborn?"

"I... I don't know."

Harry nodded. "So, Asda it is, then. God, we're gonna need two or three trolleys. Bugger, I'll need quite a bit of cash, too."

Arriving at King's Cross, Harry saw Amelia and Augusta standing together on the platform, chatting amiably. A few feet away, Dan and Emma Granger were stood, clutching onto their luggage, looking a little lost. True, they were professionals, and could always return home, and Harry had introduced them to life in the Wizarding world at Christmas, but they were still a little uncomfortable with it.

As they got off the train, Hermione bolted away, tackling her parents in a huge hug. Both Harry and Neville froze at the sight, before exchanging longing looks with each other.

"I wish..."

"I know."

With a sigh, the two boys carried on towards the assembled adults, Luna falling into step behind them. Blaise and Padma exchanged farewells, before heading off with their families.

“Ah, Harry.” Emma said, her face lighting up. “It’s good to see you again.”

Harry nodded. “You as well, Mrs. Granger. And you, Mr. Granger.”

“Harry.” Emma said sternly.

“Sorry, Emma.”

Emma turned to the sandy-haired lad next to Harry. “So, you must be... Neville, yes?”

“Yes, Mrs. Granger. Neville Longbottom.” Neville reached behind him, taking hold of Luna’s arm, and gently pulling her around. “And this is Luna Lovegood.”

A lady cleared her throat. “May I present my Grandmother, the Lady-Regent Augusta Longbottom?”

Most eyes turned to see an imposing woman, dressed in a green velvet skirt suit, a tall witch’s hat on her head. Fortunately, she’d forgone the stuffed animal on top.

“Charmed.” She drawled in typical pureblood fashion.

“Or,” Harry said impishly, “her nickname; the Lady Formidable.”

Augusta’s stern face cracked a little. “It’s nice to meet you again, Lord Potter.”

Harry grimaced. “Please...”

“I’m sorry.” Augusta said. “Yes, Neville said you don’t like your title. You prefer to be known as ‘Just Harry’, yes?”

“Yes.” Harry nodded, extending a hand to Augusta. When she took it, Harry leaned forward and kissed the back.

Susan stepped forward. “This is my Aunt, Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.” Susan gestured to each of the people. “Neville Longbottom, Harry Potter, Luna Lovegood, Hermione Granger... I’m sorry,” she said to the elder Grangers, “I don’t...”

“I’m Emma Granger, and this is my husband, Daniel Granger.” Emma smoothly filled in the introductions. “So, now we know who everyone is, I must ask, Harry; how are we travelling?”

Every eye turned to Harry, who was looking at his watch, and pointing at the end of the platform. “Wait twelve seconds, and you’ll see.”

Hermione was the first to hear the rippling noise, before a familiar wheezing/groaning sound began to fill the air.

“I just love how accurate this is.” Harry murmured, as an object began to appear, the light flashing on top making the platform glow with an unearthly light.

While the ship was materialising, Harry was already grabbing the Grangers’ luggage. “Good lord, what do you have in here? Rocks?” He muttered, as he began to haul the suitcases towards his ship. “Come on, folks. Lots to see and do.”

He stopped outside the box, placing the Grangers’ bags down, before heading to the back of the still-steaming train, to grab the five students’ trunks.

“How are we all going to fit in there?” Emma asked from the corner of her mouth. Dan shrugged helplessly.

Hermione just giggled as she pointed out her trunk to Harry, who hefted it easily. Susan’s trunk was fitted with wheels, so he grabbed that and started tugging. Neville had already grabbed his trunk and Luna’s, and was hauling them along.

“Hermione, will you grab the door?” Harry asked. She nodded, placing her hand against the magi-lock, and stepping back. Harry quickly entered the box, placing the luggage on the floor, before going back for the Grangers’, then his own.

While Harry was ferrying luggage, the elders had stumbled into the console room, and were eyeing it with curiosity (Bones and Longbottom) and awe (the Grangers). Finally, everything was on board, prompting Harry to dash to the console, sliding up a lever. The doors closed with a clang.

“Okay.” Harry stood by the console, his hands resting on the controls, seeming to draw strength from the machine. “We were thinking about either a warm Christmas in Florida, or a cold Christmas in the Rockies. Personally, we voted on the Rockies.”

Dan and Emma nodded, completely out of their depth.

“What are ‘the Rockies’?” Augusta asked.

“Mountains, in Canada.” Harry replied helpfully. “I know a lovely little spot where we can camp out. Of course, with this ship, we won’t be lacking any of the comforts of home.” He lowered his voice. “Once I’ve been shopping.”

Amelia smiled. “I think that could be nice. Of course, if it gets too cold, we can always use warming charms.”

“Indeed.” Augusta agreed. “Mr. Granger? Mrs. Granger? What about you?”

“Always wanted to go to the Rockies.” Dan said. “It’s on my list of ‘things to see before I die’, so I don’t mind.”

“Emma?” Harry asked.

“What is this place?” Emma asked, still in shock over the Portkey Box.

“Complicated.” Was all Harry said.

“Tell me.”

“Very complicated.”

Emma’s eyes narrowed. “I’m clever, and I’m listening.”

“It’s an armoured, dimensionally transcendental, runically-powered Portkey device.” Harry replied at once. “In other words, a tank that’s bigger on the inside than the outside, and can move from place to place almost instantly.”

That was something she could understand. “Oh... yeah, Rockies are fine.”

Harry nodded. “Excellent. First of all, though, need to stop off and make a quick food shop.” He began jabbing buttons and sliding levers. “While I’m setting our co-ordinates, does anyone have any food preferences?” He saw the blank looks. “Is there anything anyone won’t eat?”

“You’re cooking?” Emma asked, her face lighting up. “Damn, Harry, you spoil us. I’ll eat pretty much anything you put on the table.”

“You cook?” Amelia asked, an eyebrow shooting up. “No House Elves?”

“No, ma’am.” Harry replied, not looking up. “No House Elves. And I’ve been known to dabble in the kitchen every once in a while.”

Augusta cleared her throat. “Er... well, I’m not tremendously fond of pork, Harry.”

“Neither am I, Lady Longbottom.” Harry said. “Beef, Lamb and Chicken are all fine, not to mention Turkey on Christmas Day.” He moved round to the laptop embedded in the console, tugging on a lever as he passed. In the centre of the console, the glowing column began to move up and down, a wheezing/groaning filling the air.

“So, let’s make a quick list. For breakfasts, I’m thinking cereals, fruit, porridge and fry-ups, yes?” The group nodded, making various

'Mmm' sounds. "Sandwiches and soups for lunches..." He was typing out furiously. "So, gonna need bread, butter, margarine, fruit, crisps, snacks." He looked up. "What about drinks? Tea, coffee, hot chocolate, soft drinks and beer. Wines, maybe some spirits." More typing. "Dinners... well, that could be anything. Need chicken, turkey, sausages, lamb, beef, mince..."

"Are you gonna be making Lasagne again?" Dan asked excitedly.

"I suppose I could." Harry said coyly. "Pasta, flour, tomatoes... This is gonna be a hell of a food shop."

Bare minutes later, the noise in the console room began to change, becoming high-pitched as the ship materialised. Harry dashed round to the runic controls, expanding the area, making a sort-of common room, where the rest could sit and wait while he did his shopping.

"Dan, Emma, Hermione, could you come with me, please?" Harry pulled on the lever, opening the doors, revealing... a car park.

Two hours later, Harry was leading a procession of four trolleys into the ship, each of which was packed with carrier bags.

"Thirteen hundred pounds!" Emma was seething. "That's shocking!"

"And that didn't include the plonk." Dan said, a little shocked. "Another two hundred and fifty for that."

"What's wrong?" Amelia asked.

Emma glared over at Harry. "Fifteen hundred quid for a food shop, Harry?"

"How much is that in our money?" Amelia asked.

"Er..." Harry closed his eyes for a quick bit of match. "32 galleons, give or take."

"On one shopping trip?" Amelia asked incredulously. "That's a bit pricey."

"It's fine. Really." Harry said, as he opened the door to the kitchen, beginning to haul bags from the first trolley. Hermione didn't say anything, but she was a little shocked that he'd spent so much on such a simple thing. (1) She began to take bags from the trolley, putting them on the counters and work surfaces.

"Harry, you have to let us give you something." Emma said passionately. "You can't go spending that kind of money on us!"

"I agree." Amelia said, already reaching into her robes for her money bag.

"Stop." Harry said simply, biting his lip as he thought. "Listen... the Potter wealth is... considerable. I can afford this quite easily. Please, do not insult me by offering me money."

"This is too much!" Emma protested.

Harry sighed. "I have a family fortune of approximately sixty millions pounds, Emma. Over a million galleons of hard currency, plus quite a few properties and stocks. Please trust me. I can afford this." He ignored the looks of shock and awe, and carried on unloading the trolley.

Neville came into the kitchen, and began unloading the second trolley.

As soon as the trolleys were empty, Harry and Hermione took the trolleys back (actually putting them back into the trolley bay, instead of leaving them all over the damned car park(2)), and returned.

"Okay, brew time." Harry quickly put the big urn of water on for tea, and flicked on the coffee maker.

As he began to unpack the shopping, putting the tins in the cupboard, he cleared his throat. "Okay, there are a few 'rules of the ship' to go through." He said. "First, please don't touch the console. It's... temperamental, and it only really likes me and Hermione. Second, try not to touch the doors on the outside. They won't like you, and they'll

turn you silver. Third, please stay out of my kitchen. I'm... possessive."

"By 'temperamental', you mean..." Amelia asked.

"I mean, that's it based on blood runes, and only I'm linked in." Harry said as he threw several tea bags into a pot. "The only reason that Hermione can use the console is that the ship likes her."

"'Likes her'?" Augusta repeated. "How can a... thing, like someone?"

"Magic?" Harry said with a grin. "Seriously, though, the console's pretty much off limits."

Amelia nodded. "I'm curious, Harry; where exactly did you obtain the knowledge of blood runes? Or even runes in general? In fact, I'm curious about pretty much everything on board this... object."

"Oh?" Harry asked neutrally. "In what way?"

"You have a modified space expansion charm with subverted dimensions. You have Muggle technology working around magic without exploding. You have the ability to make Portkeys, and I've been told you can apparate." She leaned back in her chair, her arms folded. "To begin with."

Hermione leaned a little closer to Harry. She'd wanted these answers for a while, and his recent actions and statements indicated that there was a fascinating story behind it.

"Where would you like me to begin?" Harry asked.

"Let's start with this... object."

"Call it a ship, Madam Bones." Harry replied, before leaning against the bar. "Very well. The outer hull was crafted by the Goblins, at my request and specification. Once it was completed, they sent it to me in pieces. I completed the construction in my flat in Diagon Alley."

“After the box was built, I cast a massively powerful space expansion charm, linked to a blood-based runic keystone, inscribed on the bottom of the box.”

“How did you know how to do that?” Amelia asked. “That sort of Rune work is post NEWT-level.”

“I had a textbook, Madam.” Harry replied. “It showed me how to inscribe the Rune, and then to fill it with blood to bond it to myself.” All true... I just won’t tell you that I read that textbook over seventy years ago.

“I see...” Amelia nodded. It was curious, but certainly plausible. “And what about the other parts?”

Harry shrugged. “Subverting the floor was fairly easy. The console, which is comprised of Muggle technology, is shielded against magic, and charmed to draw from a techno-magical reactor at the heart of the console. And I’m sorry to say, you would never be able to understand the reactor.”

“Oh?” Amelia’s tone was frosty.

“I mean no offence, Madam Bones,” Harry said slowly, “but you don’t know Physics, and trying to explain Magical physics would take entirely too long.”

“Is... is that all you’re going to say?” Amelia asked.

Harry nodded. “Pretty much at the moment, ma’am, yes. I have secrets. I’ve never hid that. I have things that I can’t tell people at the moment. Maybe in the future, I’ll be able to. Until that time, I’m afraid I must decline to answer.”

“But...” Amelia trailed off as Susan whispered something in her ear, gesturing at Harry frantically. “I see... Harry, may I ask a question?”

“You can ask.” Harry said bluntly. “Don’t guarantee I’ll answer it, though.”

“Susan was telling me that you’ve faced He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named at the end of your first...” She trailed off as she saw Harry’s curled lip. “What?”

“‘He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’? Madam Bones, I’m disappointed in you.” Harry let out a slight sneer. “Please don’t tell me that you’re afraid of the word ‘Voldemort’.”

To her credit, she didn’t shudder or make that annoying little squeal witches and wizards made because of that hated name, but there was the tiniest hint of a flinch.

“Fine. You faced Voldemort at the end of your first year.”

“I did.” Harry replied. “He was riding around in the back of Professor Quirrell’s head, underneath that smelly turban. I fought him, and he died in the fight. I even gave him two chances to surrender, something I wouldn’t normally do. I don’t do second chances.”

Hermione held up her hand. “What about Professor Dumbledore, Harry?”

Harry sucked air through his teeth. “Yeah... kinda lied to him, really.”

“You lied to Albus Dumbledore?” Augusta asked. “How? Why?”

“I told him if he pushed, that was it. He pushed. I am, however, pragmatic. I will allow him to continue believing that I will work with him. Rest assured, when it comes down to it, I won’t. I don’t trust him, or particularly like him.” Harry said firmly. “Partly, anyway. I don’t hate him. I don’t dislike him. I don’t care about him. He’s sneaky and manipulative. The lie was ‘I don’t want to break with you. I want to get along with you.’ That was fiction. Now, I find some of Dumbledore’s antics amusing, but I don’t particularly like the old man. He’s too into his own reputation.”

“Is that a polite way of saying he has his head up his arse?” Amelia asked, the faintest traces of a smile on her face.

“That’s certainly one interpretation, Madam Bones.” Harry said airily. “Far be it that I, a mere second year student, would ever question the Director of the DMLE.” He grinned at her. “So, are we all clear with the rules?”

A general chorus of assent met his ears. “Excellent. Now, who’s up for coffee?”

While people were partaking of their beverages, Hermione sidled over to Harry. “You got a minute for a personal question?”

“Sure.”

“What about Snape?”

Harry’s eyebrow shot up. “What about his greasiness?”

“Well... you don’t do second chances.”

“True.”

“And... well, he’s constantly pushing you.”

“He is.”

“What are you going to do about him.”

“At the right time, I’m going to kill him.” Harry said casually.

“What?” Hermione gasped. “Kill him?”

Several people looked up at Hermione’s gasp. “Kill who?” Amelia Bones asked.

“Severus Snape.” Harry said. “When the time is right, he will die by my hands.”

“Why?” Most of the group was curious about this, except Luna.

"The things he has done." Luna said softly, her eyes glowing. "The things he could do."

Augusta cleared her throat. "You know that Dumbledore will never allow action be taken against his pet Death Eater."

Amelia sighed. "During the Death Eater trials in '81 and '82, Dumbledore vouched for Severus. Stated he was a spy in his ranks."

He was. He was just Voldemort's spy, not Dumbledore's. "I know the truth, Madam Bones." Before she could ask, Harry dashed her hopes. "Unfortunately, this is still not the right time."

"And when will the right time be?" Amelia asked, a bit peeved.

"Not too long." Was all Harry replied.

Emma cleared her throat. "Could you... could you really take a man's life, Harry?"

Harry frowned, deep in thought. "It would depend on the situation, Emma. Severus Snape isn't a man. He's a liar, a thief, a cheat, a rapist and a murderer. Believe me, I would have no problems with ending that threat."

"That's cold, Harry." Emma said.

"That's life, Emma." Harry retorted. "I know what Death Eaters can do. I've read the trial transcripts. I even know what's necessary to get the Dark Mark. If you have one, you're a murderer, at the very least. Severus Snape has a Dark Mark."

"You've mentioned them before, Harry. What are they?" Dan asked.

Harry sighed. "The Death Eaters were a band of terrorists, primarily pureblood wizards." He glanced around the room, looking sharply at Amelia, Susan, Neville and Augusta. "Forgive me..." They looked confused for a moment.

“In November 1981, a group of four Death Eaters, Rudolphus LeStrange, his wife Bellatrix and his brother Rastaban, along with a young man by the name of Bartemius Crouch Junior, attacked a couple. They were seeking information about the recently vanquished Lord Voldemort, in hopes of returning him to power. They tortured this couple, driving them past the brink of insanity, forcing them to be committed to St. Mungo’s hospital, where they remain to this day.

“Other members of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement arrived on the scene and managed to arrest the LeStranges, but Crouch Junior escaped, and was apprehended later. At the site of that atrocity was a sixteen month old baby.” Harry sighed softly. “That couple was Frank and Alice Longbottom, and their son was Neville.”

Every eye flicked to Neville, who had tears in his eyes.

“They were good people, and they were destroyed because of the Death Eaters.” Harry said. “They defied Voldemort himself on a number of occasions, fighting the good fight. And the Death Eaters took them away.”

“How... how do you know?” Augusta asked. Like Neville, she was damp-eyed.

“I have access to a wide range of information.” Harry said neutrally. “Another example of the Death Eaters. A man by the name of Edgar Bones. Member of a paramilitary organisation to fight Voldemort. He and his wife, Lucile, were brutally murdered, along with Marlene McKinnon in August 1981. Their bodies were found two weeks later, and had to be identified through dental records. They left behind a young daughter, who was remanded to the care of her paternal aunt.”

Susan sniffed, but didn’t say anything.

“James and Lily Potter...” Here, Harry’s eyes were filling up. “Attacked by Death Eaters on numerous occasions. Finally murdered by Voldemort himself on Halloween 1981. I still remember...” Harry gathered his thoughts. “Caradoc Dearborn, Benjy Fenwick, Dorcas Meadows, Fabian and Gideon Prewitt, Charlus and Dorea Potter... need I continue? I could keep listing names of people who were

murdered by Death Eaters. They're animals and butchers, and they need to be exterminated for the good of everyone."

Harry took a comforting sip of his tea, and wished, for a moment, to have a comforting cigarette. He'd briefly taken up smoking after his Hermione had died, but quit shortly afterwards. He pressed on.

"Most of the Death Eaters are purebloods. They are people who kill, rape and torture, and manage to escape because they have the wealth necessary to buy their way out of trouble." Harry leaned back in his chair. "Lucius Malfoy is an extremely good example. He bears the Dark Mark, but because he had the wealth to buy his way out, he claimed he was under the Imperius curse."

"There was no proof." Amelia said, frustrated. "I was an Auror at the time, and there was nothing we could do about it."

"The evidence 'disappeared'." Harry said mockingly. "In a way, I feel most sorry for the Auror division. They had a hard job, protecting people that didn't deserve it."

Amelia's eyebrow shot up.

"Oh, don't give me that look." Harry snapped. "The sheep of the Wizarding world weren't prepared to fight for themselves. They were afraid, but would rather cower." He scoffed. "Then I came along. Voldemort met his downfall in me, and the world rejoiced. 'Bless Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived!'"

Silence reigned in the sitting room. "We should be arriving in Canada shortly." Harry said, standing up. "I was thinking we could have Hot Dogs and salad for dinner this evening." He left, heading into the console room, to begin created the bedrooms and other facilities that would be needed.

Susan used her sweater sleeve to scrub her tears away. "He's right, you know. Most of the Wizarding world are cowards. Even now, people don't dare to speak Voldemort's name."

Augusta leaned forward. "He is planning a war, isn't he?" She asked.

"The war's coming." Luna sing-songed. "It will be here very soon. And we will not be ready."

"Susan?" Amelia asked.

"I've already made my choice." She said softly. "I'll stand with Harry. He's led us right so far, and I have no reason to doubt him."

"Same with me." Neville said. "I know you're the Regent, Gran, but when I'm of-age, assuming I live that long, I intend to ally House Longbottom with House Potter."

Augusta stared at her grandchild for a moment, happily noting that he didn't flinch or look away. Spending time with Harry Potter had clearly given the child some much-needed confidence. "That won't be necessary, Neville. The alliance between Longbottom and Potter was never breached. It still stands."

Hermione looked at her parents, who were still looking unsure. Yeah, they'd heard Harry at his birthday party earlier in the summer, where he told them 'The Flight of Death' would be returning, but only now was it beginning to sink in.

"You said that he'll be coming for you, no matter what." Dan said suddenly.

"Yeah." Hermione uttered. "I'm a First-Generation witch, Dad. To their viewpoint, I'm a freak. I'll be killed, since a 'filthy little Mudblood' like me shouldn't be allowed to use magic. You'd be exterminated for producing said freak."

"Charming." Dan grunted.

"But true, unfortunately." Amelia said. "That attitude is still very prominent in our society. It's unavoidable. It's one of the reasons that a lot of Muggleborns leave the country after graduating Hogwarts. They don't wish to endure the prejudice any more."

"We fight." Luna said. "We stand against the Darkness, and we fight."

Hermione was about to comment when she heard the pitch of the wheezing/groaning noise change, indicating they were coming in for a landing. "Come on. Let's go see where we are."

"It's beautiful!" Hermione exclaimed. She was stood a few feet outside the ship, looking up at the stars. Around her, snow-capped mountains shone in the moonlight, with tall evergreens surrounding a small clearing.

"I know." Harry said, leaning against the side of the Box. "I saw this place in a satellite imaging map, and I thought it'd be perfect."

The rest of the group trailed outside, stopping when they saw the incredible beauty of the place. They, too, were left speechless.

Harry smirked to himself and quickly began grabbing rocks, creating a circle on the ground in the middle of the clearing. He discretely conjured three long metal skewers and jabbed them into the ground, forming a basic tripod frame, from which he could hang a cauldron.

He disappeared back inside the ship, grabbing several tins of hot dog sausages and a packet of buns, before ambling back outside.

Shortly after dinner, Dan Granger made his way to Harry's bedroom. He knocked, and poked his head round the door. "Harry, do you have a minute?"

Harry finished putting his clothes away, and straightened up. "Sure, Dan. What's up?"

Dan sat on the edge of the bed, and began to fidget. "Er... well... there's, um... there's something I was meaning to ask you, Harry. It's a... a delicate subject."

"Come on, Dan." Harry said casually. "I'm sure there's nothing that delicate."

Dan fidgeted, before looking up. "Well... given the disgusting child-abusers that you lived with before... I'm sure they didn't... er... well, I'm sure that no-one's ever told you... about the Birds and the Bees."

Harry's casual smile fell off his face, shattering on the floor, as a look of object horror replaced it. "Er... Mr. Granger, I really don't think that's necessary."

Dan raised his hands in a mollifying gesture. "I know it's uncomfortable, Harry... it needs to be done." He gritted his teeth. "You see, Harry-

"I already know!" Harry blurted. "I know about the birds and the bees, Mr. Granger. Seriously, there's no need to have this conversation."

Dan leaned back, an eyebrow raised. "Well... I'll tell you what; you tell me what you think you know, and I'll correct you, okay?"

An evil smirk developed onto Harry's face, as he looked down on the man who, appearances aside, was only one third of his age. "Okay..."

Twenty minutes later, Dan replaced the lid on his pen. "They'll really let you do that?" He asked, looking down at the four pages of notes he'd made during the conversation.

"If you ask nicely." Harry replied, his evil smirk still firmly in place.

"And how do you know this?" Dan asked suddenly, looking up at his son-in-law-to-be.

"I read a lot, Dan." Harry replied cockily, grinning widely.

"No, seriously."

"Seriously, I do read a lot." And I did pretty much everything on that list with your daughter, who, although prim and proper in most things, is absolute filth in the sack. God... I miss her. "The rest is... well... that's a conversation for another time and a lot of Vodka."

Dan exhaled heavily. "Okay, then... tell me about your first time."

My first time? Does he know? Harry panicked. "Excuse me?"

"What are you gonna do during your first time?"

Holy shitballs..."Er... I don't know." The ability to apparate was simply not possible inside the dimensionally transcendental space of the Portkey Box, and Harry now wished, desperately, that it was possible.

"Indulge me."

Hermione cleared her throat as she reached for her cup of tea. A scream reverberated throughout the ship, prompting everyone assembled to draw their wands. Her hand flew to her mouth as she watched Harry bolt through the living room on his way to the console room. "He's mad!"

"Harry?"

"Y-Your dad... birds and bees... trauma..." Harry gasped, stumbling back as Dan entered the living room.

"Dad, what have you done?" Hermione demanded.

"I... I was just asking a question." Dan said innocently. "I didn't think he'd take it so badly."

"Daniel." Emma said sternly.

"I just thought I'd do a little education about the birds and the bees, is all." Dan said gently.

"First time..." Harry was still out of breath from his mad dash throughout the ship. "Questions..."

"Daniel!" Emma snapped. "Damn it, do we have to do this every Christmas?"

"Do what?" Augusta asked. "What the devil is going on?"

Dan quailed as he saw a number of powerful magic users holding their wands. "I... I was just asking a couple of questions."

"He's too young for his girlfriend's father to be raking him over the coals." Emma said firmly. "Just for that..." She turned to Harry. "Do you have a spare bedroom?"

"Several." Harry said slowly.

"Good." She turned back to her husband. "You'll be bunking alone tonight, Dan."

The days in the run-up to Christmas passed quickly. Harry was a charming host, and everyone felt belts and outfits become that little bit tighter when being pressed with such good food.

On Christmas Eve, Harry assembled everyone into the common area. "Okay, tomorrow morning, we'll be heading to London, so I can drop Neville and Augusta off at St. Mungo's for a couple of hours. While they're there, I'll be heading up to Godric's Hollow to lay some flowers. After that, we'll come back here and enjoy Christmas Dinner."

Emma scrunched up his face. "What's at Godric's Hollow?"

"My parents' graves." Harry said tightly. "No-one ever told me where they were before. I was planning on going and paying my respects."

"You've never been?" Susan asked, shocked. "Why not?"

"Two reasons." Harry said in a tightly controlled voice. "One, like I said, no-one told me where they were. Two, my... guardians at the time probably wouldn't piss on me if I was on fire. A trip from Surrey up to Wales? Not bloody likely. So, this will be the first time I've been."

"Hermione said she'll come with me in the morning." Harry concluded. "I won't be long while I'm there, though."

"It's fine, Harry." Amelia said. "If you don't mind, I would like to join you. I was an Auror with James back in the day. He was a good man."

“Thank you, Madam.” Harry replied politely. “We’ll be departing at nine to get Neville there for ten, and should be in Godric’s Hollow about quarter past. Pick up the Longbottoms at Midday, then come back here. Have lunch at one.” He glanced about. “Sound like a plan?”

A general chorus of ‘ayes’ was his response, and he nodded. “So mote it be.”

Christmas morning dawned in the Rockies. Harry, of course, had been up since 5am, stuffing and part-cooking the turkey, and also bleeding off some fat for the potatoes. He’d peeled, chopped, stuffed, basted and diced for over an hour, and everything was prepared. All he needed to do was turn on the oven, and he was set.

He moved over to the hob, making sure the pans of vegetables were out of the way, and began grilling bacon and sausages. Several rounds of bread were loaded into the toaster, while the kettles were put on to boil.

Pretty soon, people began appearing in the dining room, washed and dressed for the day. Augusta and Neville were clad in Wizarding robes, ready to spend time with the fallen Longbottoms. Hermione, Amelia, Emma and Dan were dressed in suitable clothes to visit the cemetery, while Susan was clad in sweats and a thick woolly jumper. Luna was still rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, while clutching onto her cutlery.

Harry began ferrying food into the dining room, the platters of bacon, sausages, eggs and a big tureen of baked beans, along with a plate of toast and two big jugs of tea and coffee.

Once breakfast was finished, Harry made sure everything was packed up, and set the ship in flight.

Harry knelt down in front of the tombstone, reaching out his hand and gently caressing the icy-cold stone. He traced the letters, absently noting that his vision was getting misty. He knew he was crying, and he didn’t give a shit. After dropping the Longbottoms off, he’d headed

straight for Godric's Hollow, finding the grave of the Potters in short order.

"This... it's quite a nice stone." He said, muffled. "Hi, Mum. Hi, Dad. I'm Harry."

Hermione sniffed suspiciously; this was a side of Harry she'd never seen before. He was letting his emotions run free, completely. On the other hand, she could see he was drawing strength from this encounter. She knelt next to him, placing the two pale pink roses on the grave.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Potter." She said softly. "I'm Hermione Granger."

"She's my best friend." Harry said suddenly. "She's my girlfriend. You'd like her, Mum. Brash, brainy, bookish and beautiful." His arm snaked around her shoulders. "She's also devious and twisted, Dad. You'd like her, too."

Hermione blushed. Yes, she was brash. She was certainly brainy, and if you looked up 'bookish' in the dictionary, you'd see it was spelt H-E-R-M-I-O-N-E. But beautiful? She conveniently ignored the devious and twisted comments, since she knew they were true. "I've heard a bit about you both." She said to the stone. "I think you'd be so proud of your son. He's a good man."

"Thanks." Harry mumbled. "I... I wish I'd known you. I've wanted to meet you... for so long. To talk about pranks with Dad. Discuss charms with you, Mum. Play Quidditch and read. Chase a stag around the house. So many things..."

Hermione leaned closer to Harry. "I... I wish I knew what to say to help, Harry." She whispered.

"You're here." Harry replied. "And that's enough, Hermione." Harry kissed his fingers before pressing them against the tombstone, and hauling himself to his feet, Hermione matching him at his side. He took a step back, watching Amelia step forward with a pair of yellow roses.

“Jimmy... Lils. I’m sorry I didn’t come before now.” She took a step back, not bothering to wipe away the tears in her eyes. “No-one knew where you were. Every year... on Halloween night, I look up at the stars, and I thank you for what you’ve done.” She bowed her head for a moment, before looking up at Harry.

“Come on.” He said, scrubbing his eyes on his sleeve. “Let’s get back to the ship.”

As Harry entered the Box, he looked over at the marker. The line is drawn. It shall not be crossed again. I won’t let it.

After collecting Neville and Augusta, the group sat down to the table, and scarfed their way through nearly 80 kilos of high-quality food. Stumbling from the table, Harry set the dishes to wash themselves, before slumping onto the couch.

“It’s official.” He groaned. “I’m f’lup.”

“If that means ‘full up’, then I’m right there with you.” Hermione replied, her voice low. “I love Christmas, but I hate the pain from overeating a meal.” She swatted Harry’s arm pathetically. “Damn you, Harry, for making such good food.”

“Sorry. I’ll make gruel next time.” Harry closed his eyes.

“Shouldn’t we do the present ritual?” Neville asked, already beginning to doze.

“Later...” Harry mumbled as he, too, began to drift off.

“Harry?” Amelia asked, her eyes closed.

“Yeah?” He slurred.

“How did you get to be such a good cook? As I understand it in the Muggle world, it’s generally the women who cook, not the men. Especially not young men.”

“Didn’t have a choice.” Harry muttered. He never noticed Amelia’s eyes opening, nor Dan and Emma gesturing to the elder woman to take a short walk.

When Harry awoke, his first priority was the bathroom. He needed to pee, quite desperately, and his mouth tasted absolutely vile. He quickly headed away, leaving the others youths sleeping on the couches.

Four minutes later, with a much smaller bladder and a minty-freshness, he ambled into the console room, wondering where the adults had got to.

He found them outside, sitting around the fire pit, each with another glass of wine.

“Ello.” He called out as he stepped through the doors. One look at their slightly guilty faces made him curious. “Well... this looks... uncomfortable.”

Amelia looked at Harry sharply. “Why didn’t you tell anyone what had happened to you?”

With a light glare at the Grangers, who flinched, Harry faced the director. “What could be done about it, Madam? The Wizarding world most likely wouldn’t take any action because they’re Muggles. Dumbledore would block any attempts, since he still wants to send me back to them, in the hope of resurrecting the blood wards, which I know don’t work.”

“He could be stopped.” Augusta said sharply. “While he does have a large power-base in the Wizengamot, he’s not infallible. Nor is he unbeatable.”

Harry shook his head. “No, he’s not unbeatable. I agree with that. But, in order for that concession to be made, he’d want me to give up my emancipation, and go and live with a family of his choice. And I’d bet two hundred galleons of mine to two Knuts of yours that I would end up spending time at the Dursleys’. No, it’s over with. They managed to escape.”

Amelia sighed angrily. "There must be something we can do."

Harry discretely cast a wandless warming charm on himself. "How much did Dan and Emma tell you?"

Augusta spoke up. "In basic terms, what you told them last Christmas, and also what you told them at your birthday party this summer. You predict that Voldemort will return, and you plan to be on the front lines of the upcoming war."

Harry nodded. "Correct."

"My niece has already pledged herself to your banner." Amelia said.

"As has Neville." Augusta added.

"And Hermione." Dan and Emma concluded.

"Yeah... they're good people." Harry said with a smile. "Now, for some reason, I seem to pick up magic fairly quickly, so I'm planning on training them in the fight. Occlumency first, then some basic spell-casting and duelling, all the while teaching them some physical fitness. Since I know that as the Director of the DMLE, you could get them underage exemptions from the Restriction, you could allow them to train at home during the summers."

Amelia's eyes narrowed. "Oh?"

Harry chuckled. "That's not why I invited you, ma'am. I don't want anything from you. The only benefit to me if the others have an exemption is that they'll be able to practice their spell-casting, and thus, have a chance at being safer. That is my goal. I want them to be safe and happy."

Augusta cleared her throat. "Have you claimed the Potter seat in the Wizengamot?"

"No." Harry said. "I really don't want to get involved in politics, ma'am. I simply don't have the patience for it, plus, I find it a bit boring."

"But by claiming your seat, you'd have access to the Ministry archives." Augusta pressed on. "Which means access to the Wizengamot library. Surely such a thing would be beneficial to you and your... mission."

"Not at the present time, ma'am." Harry said. "Besides, need a good foundation to build on before you look at the more advanced stuff. At the moment, I'm content to learn more myself, and teach my friends."

"And when the war comes?" Amelia asked.

"Then I shall fight." Harry replied firmly.

"And your friends?" Amelia pressed on doggedly.

"I hope they have the good sense to run like hell, ma'am." Harry said with a chuckle. "Being around me at that point will be dangerous. When Voldemort returns, he'll be coming for me. I'm an embarrassment to him. The 'Boy-Who-Lived' implies he failed, and that is something he will want to erase as soon as possible."

"We said we'll stand with you, Harry." Hermione said from the doorway. "We meant it, too."

"Longbottoms have always stood with the Potters, Harry." Neville said firmly. "It would be a disgrace to my parents, my grandmother, and nine centuries of Longbottoms for me to do otherwise. I'll have your back during the war, until I'm no longer capable of fighting." He snorted. "Besides, I owe Bellatrix."

"I owe it to my Mum and Dad." Susan whispered, but she could still be heard. "They gave their lives to stand against the Darkness, and I won't shame them by running away."

Luna was the last to speak. "You need me, Harry."

"I need all of you," He said softly, "but that doesn't mean I want you hurt. Same for Blaise and Padma. You don't know... you can't know what's coming..."

"I have a pretty good idea." Amelia said sharply. "Do you know when this will begin?"

"Not... not exactly." Harry said diplomatically. "I think, though, then when it does begin, we'll get a very clear sign."

Amelia nodded slowly, allowing that subject to rest for a time. "Tell me about the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry blinked. "Er... what about it?"

"Tell me what you know." Amelia said firmly. "I understand that you have a rather large dose of knowledge about Hogwarts."

With a shrug, Harry replayed the conversation Binns had first given. "According to official records, there is no Chamber of Secrets. In reality, when Hogwarts was built, the argument that drove Salazar Slytherin from the school was that he believed that First-Generation witches and wizards should be taken from their families and raised exclusively in the magical world. This was for protection. The other three founders didn't agree, and Slytherin left."

"And?" Amelia asked.

"And before he left, Slytherin built a secret chamber, where he housed a 'monster'. We now know that the 'monster' is a basilisk. That basilisk would be used if the school were in danger to purge those who are 'unworthy'."

Emma's eyes narrowed. "Didn't you say that people nowadays think that Muggleborns are unworthy?"

"Now, yes. But not then." Harry said. "The 'unworthy' back in the tenth century was non-magical people who'd invaded Hogwarts intent on destruction."

"Don't you think that's a little harsh?" Emma asked.

"No, not really." Harry said. "I'm 'unworthy' of trying to perform a tooth extraction in your practice, Emma, since I'm not a qualified dentist. I'm 'unworthy' of trying to arrest people for Madam Bones since I'm not an Auror. In that case, Emma, you'd call the police to have me removed. Madam Bones would have one of her Aurors arrest me. Back in the tenth century, there weren't any police, not really. So, they had to fight for themselves."

"And this basilisk has become active?" Augusta asked. "Why hasn't Dumbledore notified anyone of this?"

"That, ma'am, I couldn't say." Harry said. "However, we don't believe that the basilisk itself has become active. We believe that there's someone behind the scenes, pulling the strings."

"And what led you to this conclusion?" Amelia asked.

"The writing, ma'am." Harry said. "When we found the first petrified being, in this case, Filch's cat, there was writing on the wall, in blood. Last time I checked, snakes couldn't write."

"Have there been any other attacks?" Amelia asked, whipping out a small notebook and a biro.

"Two other attacks, Auntie." Susan spoke up. "Colin Creevey, a first year, was found petrified, by Harry. There was an attempt on Justin Finch-Fletchley. Harry was able to stop that attack. Now-Headless Nick was attacked, though. Madam Pomfrey had to take him to the hospital wing."

Amelia nodded. "You were at the scene for the first attack, found the second victim, and stopped the third. If I was paranoid-"

"Don't!" Susan snapped. "He was with us for the first. Besides, he's already told us that the Heir of Slytherin is Voldemort."

"Is..." Amelia was nibbling her bottom lip in thought. "Tell me about Quirrell, Harry."

“Voldemort had possessed him, ma’am, but a full physical possession. It included a manifestation of Voldemort’s face on the back of Quirrell’s head. Because of the blood protection from my mother, Quirrell couldn’t stand to be touched by me. When he attacked me, I placed my hands on either side of his face. He burned. Voldemort escaped as a spirit.”

Amelia nodded. “Is it possible that the spirit is possessing someone else? The same way he did Quirrell?”

Harry’s eyebrow arched up. “I never thought of that.” And he hadn’t needed to, really, since he already knew that Ginny was being possessed by the Horcrux, but it was still a good thought. “I don’t think so, though. No-one else is hiding themselves that way. If it is possession, then it’s not the same as Quirrell.”

“Has anyone checked the wards?” Augusta asked. “From my understanding, the wards surrounding Hogwarts scan every object going in and out. Surely someone bringing something dark in could be investigated.”

“You’d have to ask the Headmaster about that.” Harry said. “While I am an heir myself, I don’t have access to the wards.” He closed his eyes. “I could possibly ask the school if there’s anyone being possessed, but she doesn’t have to answer me.”

“‘Ask the school’?” Dan asked. “How can you ask the school?”

Harry grinned. “After ten centuries of ambient magic and the emotional upheaval of so many teenagers, the castle’s almost alive. She even has a name. ‘Arx Accipio’. Fortress of Learning. Still, the Headmaster is the one who’d be able to check more thoroughly than I could.”

Augusta glanced at Amelia, who nodded. “Then when we return to Britain, we shall ask him. I don’t like the idea that he hasn’t notified the board of governors, nor the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.” She thought for a moment. “Harry, do you need a contact in the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures? I know a man in there.”

Harry slowly shook his head. "I don't think so, ma'am. I'm hopeful that the situation can be resolved peacefully."

"And how do you propose that?"

"Well, I'm hoping that if I ask the basilisk to stop, they will."

"You're... you're a Parselmouth?"

§I am indeed.§ Harry hissed.

Both Augusta and Amelia flinched slightly, before realising that they looked like idiots doing so, especially when they saw the other for children smirking at them.

"Don't laugh." Amelia moaned. "You have no idea how frightening it is facing a Parselmouth in a fight. You never know what they're gonna throw at you."

"True." Harry said. "But, I'm hopeful that I can stop the basilisk from any more attacks. Just need to find the damned thing first. Unfortunately, practically no-one knows where the Chamber of Secrets is. When it's found, then we can proceed."

Amelia nodded, before moving on to her next point. "What're your views on the Dark Arts, Harry?"

"Well... Hang on a minute... am I being interviewed, Director?" Harry looked up at her, his eyes narrowed.

"Maybe a little bit." Amelia admitted shamelessly.

"Auntie!" Susan snapped.

"It's okay, Sue." Harry said, holding up his hand. "I understand." He smiled at Amelia. "Devious and sneaky, ma'am. You must have been a Slytherin."

“Hufflepuff, actually.” Amelia replied. “And you didn’t answer the question.”

“No, I didn’t.” Harry nodded. “Very well. The Dark Arts... is a bit of a wrong name. I could find a use for almost every Dark Arts spell, ma’am. Oddly enough, most of them in cooking.”

“Cooking?” Amelia asked, completely surprised by the answer. “Dark Arts Cooking?”

“Yes, ma’am. That’s where most of them were invented for anyway.” Harry said. “Take... take the blood removal curse. When it’s performed on a person, they die within six minutes. When it’s performed on a dead animal, it helps to prepare them for cooking. It was designed as an abattoir spell.”

“Really?” Amelia asked.

“Yeah. In non-magical abattoirs, the dead carcass is hung in the air with their throat slit, allowing the blood to drain out. Magicals don’t do that. They simply vanish the blood. The Excorio Tergum spell, which is horrific when used on a person to remove their skin, neatly removes the pelt off an animal. The Cruciatus can be used to restart a stopped heart. The Imperius can be used for dentistry. The AK can be used to kill animals in the abattoir. It’s all intent, ma’am.”

“There are some spells which have no light use, Harry.”

“True. Those don’t necessarily make them dark, though. I could use a tickling curse to drive someone to insanity. There is no truly dark magic.” He sighed. “Besides, most of the grey spells you’re talking about were designed for a specific reason. The blood-boiling curse is excellent against vampires. Won’t kill them, but it will stop them. The blood-to-stone curse is another one. Again, excellent against vampires, and possibly feral werewolves.”

“Have you ever used any Dark spells?”

Harry sucked air through his teeth. “Once, ma’am. The Cruciatus. I was attacked by a wild dog. I hit it for less than a second. It gave me

time to get away from it.” And it was true, as well. Bellatrix LeStrange was a mad dog, and that second of Crucio had allowed him to get away from her. True, it was because Voldemort turned up, but still...

Amelia nodded. “I’ve been hit by the Cruciatus myself. It hurts. A lot. I would advise not using it if there are other spells available.”

“Understood, ma’am.” Harry said. “Other than that, I haven’t even tried to use an Unforgiveable. They’re a little too easy to get used to.”

Again, Amelia scribbled something in her little notebook. “What’s your ultimate goal in life, Harry?”

“Destroy Voldemort. Destroy the corruption in the Ministry and the Wizengamot. Have as many children as I can.” He glanced at Hermione, who was blushing on his last comment. “Live a long, healthy and happy life with my family.”

Amelia nodded, closed her notebook, and slipped it back into her pocket. “Goals I agree with and support. You have my allegiance, Lord Potter.”

“Thank you.” Harry said, bowing slightly. “Now... who’s up for throwing presents at each other?”

(1) It’s true. I can spend two hundred pounds on my food and drink shopping for Christmas Day alone. Frequently have done in the past, too.

(2) Pet peeve. I hate when you start to pull into a parking space, and somebody’s abandoned a shopping trolley in it. Bastards. There’s little signs that tell you where to put them, and they even build little enclosures for them, too. Really, folks, it’s not that difficult. When you’ve loaded up the car, take the thirty seconds to put the trolley back. Please?

– CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO –

Impotence

The return to Hogwarts happened fairly simply. Harry had returned the Longbottom elder to her home, followed by dropping Amelia off at the Ministry of Magic. The Portkey Box landed in the Grangers' back garden, allowing them to simply enter the house straight away.

The Portkey box then landed on Platform 9¾ at 10:45, allowing the kids to disembark and climb onto the train, leaving the box to head back to Harry's dormitory in Ravenclaw tower. All in all, a successful Christmas.

Once back at school, the group had managed to quickly get back into the swing of things. Naturally, all their holiday homework had been completed early, allowing them plenty of time to practice their Occlumency exercises, and more research into the Chamber of Secrets.

Unfortunately, the information on the Chamber of Secrets was just too limited. Practically nothing in the school library, even the restricted section when they'd snuck in under Harry's invisibility cloak, could tell them anything useful.

On the other hand, there hadn't been any attacks during the Christmas period, which, for those people who were too dumb to know better, believed that was further proof that Harry was lying, and that he was indeed the Heir of Slytherin. Some people never learn.

Snape had been his usual cheery self, piling on as much homework as he could. Harry knew that it was mainly aimed at himself, since Snape had been made to look a fool in each of his encounters with Harry. True, it was very easy to make Snape look like a fool, since he was one, but he was still a potential danger to Harry's plans.

"Mr. Potter, would you remain behind, please?" McGonagall asked at the end of their transfiguration lesson. They'd been back at Hogwarts for five weeks, and had comfortably gotten back in track.

“Yes, Professor?” Harry asked as he stepped up to her desk.

“I was wondering if you’ve heard anything more about the Chamber of Secrets, Harry?” She asked, a little uncomfortably. “We searched the school again during the holiday break, and we didn’t find anything of use to us.”

“Anything of use’?” Harry asked. “That implies that you did find something, ma’am.”

McGonagall sighed. “We found another broom closet, one that went missing in the eighties.”

“Oh.” Harry sniggered like the twelve year old he was pretending to be. “That’s good to know, ma’am. Where is it?”

“Never you mind.” McGonagall said, a small smile on her face. “You don’t need to know about those quite yet.”

“Of course, ma’am.” Harry said solemnly, an effect which was ruined by the grin on his face. “As to the Chamber, I’ve not learned anything new yet.” I’m getting so good at this misdirection bollocks. Harry thought. It’s true; I haven’t learned anything new yet. Huh... need to be careful. I’ll end up talking and thinking like Dumbledore soon.

McGonagall sighed. “Then we’re at a loss, Harry. If there are any more attacks, we run the risk of Hogwarts being shut down.”

“I’m not worried, ma’am.” Harry said, before grinning impishly. “With such a fine defeater of evil as Professor Lockhart here, I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

“I wish I shared your confidence, Harry.” McGonagall replied, not smiling. “This has been my home for many decades, and I have no wish to leave it. We need to know more. Are you sure there isn’t anything else?”

Harry realised that she was genuinely scared, and that worried him. Even during the first time, she’d shown concern, yes, but fear? This

was new to him. "Ma'am, I swear to you, I will stop whatever is doing this. You have my word."

She nodded slowly. "I just wish there was more we could do."

Harry took a step back, hoisting his back onto his shoulder. "I'll take care of it, ma'am."

Once outside the classroom, where the rest of his friends were waiting, with the exception of Luna, he leaned against the wall.

"Harry? Is everything okay?" Hermione asked tenderly, resting a hand against his arm.

"No." He said softly. "McGonagall's scared. I... I've never seen her scared before. It's... disconcerting."

"She asked you if you'd heard anything about the Chamber?" Blaise asked.

"She did." Harry confirmed. "But... she's worried about the school closing down. I told her..." He realised exactly what he'd told her, and groaned inwardly. "I told her I'll take care of it."

Blaise's eyebrow shot up. "And how do you propose to do that?"

"At the right time." Luna said, approaching from the far end of the corridor. "Harry, I know what you're thinking, and you can't, not yet."

"I know." Harry sighed. "Damn it, I wish I could just... fix all the world's problems." He pushed with his butt against the wall, levering himself back to his feet. "Come on, let's... let's get to potions."

Later that evening, Harry was back inside his Portkey Box, tinkering. Even though he'd only had the box for seven months, he'd comfortably focussed on that as his new tinkering obsession. It was better than playing hangman. He'd begun to decipher the spells on the Marauders' map, and was making notes, but he wasn't any closer to creating his sensor array.

“Ah, I knew you were there.” Hermione said as she stepped into the console room. “I was wondering.”

“Hey, girlfriend.” Harry said softly. “How’re you doing?”

“How’re you doing, Harry?” She volleyed back. “Come on, I can see it in you. You’re worried about this whole thing as well, aren’t you?”

“I am.” Harry admitted. “I just want to set things right, Hermione. And if I do... what happens then?”

“I don’t know.” Hermione said. “But, Harry, no one person can make everything better. You know that.”

“I do. I just... I want it done.”

She stepped closer and wrapped him in a tight ‘Hermi-hug’. As usual, it had the effect of calming him down. “Be patient, Harry. I’m sure everything will work out okay.”

I hope so. By playing with time, I could end up destroying everything. Harry groused to himself. When the time comes, Tom, I will wipe you out of existence for everything you’ve done.

Harry knocked on the door to the Headmaster’s office, a little trepidation in his veins. Had Dumbledore scanned one of his friends’ minds and found out that he wasn’t really willing to let bygones be bygones?

“Come in, Harry.” Dumbledore’s voice called through the wood.

Opening the door, Harry let himself in, casually sauntering to the chair in front of the desk.

“Please, sit down, Harry.” Dumbledore said, reaching forward onto the desk and offering a bowl. “Lemon drop?”

“Laced or unlaced?” Harry asked.

“Ah, yes.” Dumbledore reached into his desk drawer, pulling out a small white paper bag. “My apologies, I forgot about that. Unlaced lemon drop?”

Harry plucked a sour sweet from the bag, and threw it into his mouth. Tucking it into his cheek so he could still speak, he asked, “What can I do for you, Headmaster?”

Dumbledore tossed a sweet into his mouth, copying Harry’s cheek trick. “I was wondering how your training was going with your friends, Harry. Specifically, their Occlumency training.”

“Why, sir?” Harry asked politely.

“While you’ve been training them now for several months, you haven’t really been able to test their shields, have you?”

“Not really, sir.” Harry replied. “I’m incapable of performing Legilimency.”

“Not to mention, as the one who is teaching them Occlumency, it’s harder for you to search their minds. I was wondering if you’d consider allowing a Legilimens to check their defences.”

Harry’s eyebrow shot up. “Why are you asking me, sir? It’s their minds that you’re asking to check.”

“True.” Dumbledore agreed. “However, we both know that you are the leader of your group, Harry. If you were to authorise it, they would be more likely to agree.”

“Hmm...” Harry considered it for a moment. “And who would you like to be the Legilimens who checks their shields, sir?”

“Oh, either myself or Professor Snape, Harry.” Dumbledore replied. “We’re the only registered Legilimens here at Hogwarts, and both of us are very proficient in the mind arts.”

Harry repressed a snigger. “I’m sorry, sir. But, I can’t speak on behalf of my friends. Not in this. If you wish their consent to check, you’ll

need to ask them. However, I will advise you that the request would probably go better if it were you offering to check, rather than Professor Snape. He's... he's not very popular with the students."

"Ah, Harry." Dumbledore said sadly. "I understand that you and Professor Snape don't get along. The grudge he had with your father has clearly spilled over to you, and for that, I apologise. However, Severus is a trusted member of staff, and would not hurt anyone."

"Except me, sir." Harry replied firmly. "You may trust Professor Snape, sir, but I don't. He has attacked and belittled me at every opportunity, and I feel no reason to allow him any more chances to do so."

Dumbledore sighed. "I understand, Harry. However, don't you believe in being the bigger man? Turning the other cheek?" He gasped suddenly as the Unbreakable Vow he'd entered into with Harry began warning him that he was pushing the boundaries of his oath.

"Turn the other cheek, sir?" Harry asked. "Why? So he can slap both cheeks? No, sir. I will deal with Severus Snape in my own time, and in my own way. If you want to check the others' shields, you'll have to ask them."

"Very well, Harry." Dumbledore said, feeling the warning vanish. "Is there anything else you wish to discuss at the moment?"

"No, sir."

"Anything you... wish to tell me, Harry?"

"No, sir." Harry replied again. "Nothing I wish to tell you at the present time, sir."

"Very well, Harry. Dismissed."

"Sir."

While Harry left, Dumbledore pondered the sharp pain in his chest while he'd been speaking to Harry. It was clear, since the Vow had

promised no manipulations, that he couldn't even appeal to Harry's better nature without being affected by the vow. This certainly bore watching. At the moment, he was impotent in his dealings with Harry, but there was now a question for him: just how far could he push Harry Potter?

Harry met up with the others in the Great Hall. He sat down, pulling a plate of bread rolls closer. "Hey, guys."

"Hey." All six replied in unison, making Harry blink.

"Er... just come from a meeting with Dumbledore." Harry said after a moment. "He wants to check your Occlumency barriers." He paused. "Well, him or Snape check your Occlumency barriers."

Hermione's eyebrow shot up. "And what did you say?"

"That he'll have to ask you." Harry said, wondering why she'd felt the need to ask that. "It's your minds, your choice."

"Oh." Hermione nodded, feeling a bit foolish. "Sorry, Harry."

"No probs." He replied, reaching over for the lasagne. "He was also trying to get me to work alongside Snape."

"I thought his Vow meant he couldn't manipulate you." Padma asked.

"It does. He found that out when he got a sudden pain in his chest." Harry smirked. "But, I know Dumbledore. He'll start pushing, to see just how far he can go. I'm not worried, though. If he tries, then he'll end up a dead'un. Oh dear, what a pity, never mind."

Hermione continued with her lasagne, wishing she could get Harry to teach the cooks here his version. It was infinitely better. "Valentines coming up soon." She said softly.

All seven of them stopped eating for a moment as they looked at her.

“Oh, no...” Harry groaned as he looked up at the staff table. Sure enough, Gilderoy Lockhart was beaming as he looked out over the students.

“What’s wrong with Valentines?” Padma asked.

“Well, nothing, really.” Harry replied. “Last year, I made two very good friends out of it.” He beamed at Padma and Sue, who both blushed. “But, last year we didn’t have Gilderoy Lockhart, the magical equivalent of Brad Pitt, running rampant at the school. Ten galleons says he’ll have something planned for the day.” He sighed heavily.

“Don’t worry, Harry.” Hermione whispered.

“I’m not.” He whispered back. “I already have an idea at what I’m going to get my beautiful girlfriend for Valentines.”

Padma, Blaise and Neville coughed loudly when they saw Hermione blush wildly. “I get the feeling we really don’t want to know the contents of that conversation.”

“No, you probably don’t.” Harry said blandly. “However, you might want to be in the Great Hall on Valentine’s.”

“Oh, something special?” Neville asked.

Harry smirked. “I hope so.”

On Valentine’s morning, Hermione woke up. She didn’t open her eyes, as she normally would. Instead, she breathed deeply, smiling widely when she smelt the delicate aroma of roses. As she opened her eyes, she spotted, instead of yellow roses like last year, they were pink roses. Hermione knew that these were a sign of romantic affection, but not as intense as red roses, which meant simply “I love you.”

These flowers, of which there were six large bouquets, simply filled the room with sweet smells, and a message that Harry definitely cared for her. As Hermione looked around, she spotted a large teddy

bear sitting on her dressing table, another rose pinned to it's chest, and a small box of chocolates taped to it's paw.

Harry... you little romance devil, you. She thought with a huge smile. One day...

A knock on her door made her frown. She got up, grabbed her dressing down, and opened the door a crack, peering through. Outside the door was Padma and Luna, both of whom were dressed and wearing little smirks. "We wanted to see if he slipped you anything." Padma said.

With a sigh, Hermione opened the door, letting them see all the bouquets sitting round the room, and pointed to the teddy bear. "I'm going for a shower." Hermione said, grabbing her wash bag.

After showering, dressing and heading downstairs, Hermione waited in the common room, intent on pouncing on Harry and 'thanking' him properly for the gift.

Taped to the wall, in between the staircases, was a note. Hermione pulled it down, noting that it was in Harry's chicken-scratch.

Hermione,
The rest of your present is down in the Great Hall. I'll see you soon.
Love,
Harry

Hermione showed the note to Padma and Luna, who squealed (Luna squeals? Hermione asked herself) before pulling her towards the portrait hole. Outside, Blaise, Susan and Neville were waiting.

"Harry said we had to meet early." Neville yawned. "Then escort you to breakfast."

"Okay." Hermione said timidly. What the hell had he gotten her?

Down in the Great Hall, they saw Gilderoy Lockhart clad in shockingly-pink robes. Fortunately, the rest of the Great Hall looked normal. They'd half-expected cheesy decorations all over the hall.

Unknown to them, Harry had torn them down and gleefully tossed them into the fireplace earlier that morning. There was no need for tat, after all.

“Good morning!” Lockhart boomed. “I thought that we could all do with a pick-me-up, considering the unpleasantness of last term. I’d like to thank the forty-five people who’ve sent me cards!” He gestured to the doors, where a group of six surly dwarves were standing, each of them dressed in a ridiculous cupid outfit. The six friends instantly felt sorry for them.

“The cupids will be delivering your valentines all day today, so if you see one, be sure to give it any cards you have.” He gestured to the other teachers. “I’m sure the other staff members would be glad to assist you on this, the most romantic day of the year. Professor Snape could surely tell you how to whip up a love potion.”

Snape stood up, glaring at Lockhart. “The first person who asks me for a love potion will become the ingredient in a potion.” He glared at the rest of the hall. “Are we perfectly clear?”

The occupants in the Great Hall were clear.

Lockhart cleared his throat. “Yes... well... perhaps Professor Flitwick would be able-”

“Leave me out of this... disgrace.” Flitwick snapped angrily. “I really don’t want to hear your suggestion. Perhaps sitting quietly and enjoying your breakfast would be better, Gilderoy.”

Cowed, the fop sat down, shuffling his chair slightly further away from the enraged Charms master, who hopped onto his chair. “Ladies and Gentlemen, while we, the staff, certainly agree with Valentines, please do not allow it to go to your head. As I’m sure you’re all aware, using love spells or potions against another is illegal and we will prevent this from happening.” He sat down, staring at the hall. Next to him, Professor McGonagall tittered, before sobering.

Hermione shook her head, unconsciously leaning her head down to sniff the pink rose she’d pinned to her robes, before heading towards

the Ravenclaw table. "I wonder where Harry is?" She said to no-one in particular.

The band of angry dwarves were stomping throughout the Great Hall, delivering letters and cards to different people, each and every one glowing with embarrassment.

"Where is Harry?" Neville asked out of the corner of his mouth. "Although, considering the popularity of the 'Boy-Who-Lived', I think I can understand him hiding."

"Not a clue." Blaise replied. "I think that dwarf," pointing to a particularly annoyed-looking one, "wouldn't mind finding him."

The lights in the Great Hall faded slowly, ceasing all conversations instantly.

"What's going on?" Hermione whispered.

On the stage, a single male stepped out, clutching onto a magical microphone, with a small CD player and speakers in his other hand.

"Is that Harry?" Padma whispered.

"Oh, my..." Susan said quickly, having figured it out. "Ballad time!"

Hermione's face lit up as a spotlight locked onto her seat at the Ravenclaw table. Even though she was very embarrassed, she couldn't deny this was very sweet.

On the stage, Harry pressed play. An old tune, very familiar to the Muggleborns, began to play. Harry raised the microphone to his lips. "Oh, my love... my darling, I've hungered for your touch." He smiled at Hermione. "A long... lonely time." He stepped off the stage, slowly beginning to walk down the aisle towards Hermione. "And time goes by so slowly, and time can do so much, are you... still mine?"

Hermione's blush had escalated to epic proportions, but she wouldn't stop this for... well, anything.

“Did you know Harry’s voice was this good?” Susan asked Neville. He just shook his head, not wanting to interrupt.

“I need your love.” Harry was now about a third of the way down the aisle, and halfway towards Hermione, who was grinning at him. “I need your love.”

Draco Malfoy stood up, undoubtedly trying to ruin the moment, but a silencing spell from Daphne Greengrass quickly stopped him. True, she didn’t like Potter much, but a romantic gesture such as this? It cut through even her ice queen act straight to the heart.

Likewise, at the Gryffindor table, Fred and George Weasley quickly silenced their brother, placing a strong sticking charm on his robes so he couldn’t get up.

“God speed your love to me.”

Harry reached out to Hermione, and took her hand, smiling warmly at her. She felt her heart melt at the gesture. “Lonely rivers flow to the sea, to the sea, to the open arms... of the sea.” He pulled her up to her feet, and wrapped his free hand round her waist.

“Lonely rivers sigh... wait for me... wait for me, I’ll be coming home... wait for me.”

Hermione pressed a kiss against his nose, snuggling into his side. Harry moved the microphone so they could share it, and complete the ballad together. Hermione blushed for a moment, before nodding.

“Whoa, my love... my darling, I’ve hungered, hungered for your touch,” They sang together, still squeezing each other. “A long... lonely time, and time goes by... so slowly, and time can do so much, are you... still mine?”

McGonagall glanced at Flitwick, remembering the bet they’d made the previous year, about Harry and Hermione being married before they left Hogwarts. At this rate, they’d be married by the end of third year. She didn’t mind, though. This was truly a beautiful moment, and she was honoured that they were sharing it with everyone.

"I need your love, I need your love," The two turned to face the majority of the hall, and completed the last line. "God speed your love to me!"

As soon as the song ended, Harry pressed a kiss to Hermione's lips, before smiling warmly at her. "Happy Valentine, Hermione Granger."

The Great Hall erupted into applause, even those students who thought that Harry was the Heir of Slytherin couldn't deny that it was a beautiful moment. A number of seventh years were handing round conjured tissues.

Harry smiled as he quickly walked up to the stage, grabbing his CD player.

"Excellently done, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore said. "Truly a magic more impressive than anything we do here."

"Thank you, sir."

"Do you know any other songs?"

Harry paused. "Quite a few, sir. Why?"

"Would you consider performing another song for us?"

Harry froze. "I'm not a professional singer, sir. Besides, I'm sure I've interrupted breakfast enough for everyone."

"No!" the Great Hall near-screamed, before a chant of "Potter! Potter!" erupted.

Hermione looked up at Harry and nodded, wanting him to continue. With a sigh, he nodded. "Okay... one more. Then, I want my breakfast." He quickly remembered what was on the CD, and smiled. "I'll need two backing singers. At least one girl." He looked pleadingly at Hermione, who sighed and nodded. Luna stood up. "I know the song, Harry."

They calmly walked up to the stage, while Harry jabbed the controls on the CD player. A moment later, he took a deep breath. "You never close your eyes any more, when I kiss your lips, and there's no tenderness like before, in your fingertips, you're trying hard not to show it..."

Hermione and Luna quickly filled in the, "baby,"

Harry grinned. "But, baby... baby, I know it!"

All three sang together. "You've lost that loving feeling, oh, that loving feeling, you've lost that loving feeling, Now it's gone, gone, gone... Whoa-oh."

Harry continued. "Now there's no welcome look, in your eyes when I reach for you, And, girl, you're starting to criticise... little things I do." He plastered a mournful expression onto his face. "It makes me just feel like crying,"

Again, Luna and Hermione filled in the, "baby!"

"Cause baby... something beautiful's dying!"

Again, all three sang the chorus together. "You've lost that loving feeling, oh, that loving feeling. Bring back that loving feeling, Now it's gone, gone, gone... and I can't go on... No-oh-oh."

Stepping forward, Harry dropped to his knees heavily, extending his free hand to the crowd. "Baby, baby... I'll get down on my knees for you."

Behind him, Hermione and Luna stepped forward, humming along as they each rested a hand on his shoulders. "If you would only love me like you used to do, we had a love, a love, a love you don't find every day, So don't... don't... don't let it slip away!"

Hermione began singing, "Baby!", interspersed with Luna as they filled the musical, while Harry stared at the floor, before they joined

together for the chorus. "Bring back that loving feeling, Oh, that loving feeling, Bring back that loving feeling, now it's gone... gone... gone..."

Harry stood up, taking a step back and wrapping an arm around Hermione's waist as they concluded the song together. "And I can't go on... No-oh-oh..."

"Bring back that loving feeling, Oh, that loving feeling, Bring back that loving feeling, now it's gone... gone... gone..." The three trailed off as the music died. The instant the song was over, every person in the Great Hall, with the exception of Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy, who would never clap for a Potter, no matter what he did, hauled themselves to their feet, clapping, whistling and cheering.

Harry shook his head before grabbing his CD player, and jumping off the stage. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, that's all. That's all, ladies and gentlemen, thank you." He near-ran to his spot at the Ravenclaw table, sitting down and quickly loading up a plate of breakfast.

Hermione and Luna sat next to him, Hermione near-sitting on his lap. "That was beautiful, Harry. Thank you."

"No problem, Hermione." Harry said softly. "Happy Valentines."

"Thank you." She smiled at him. "You want to tell me how you got those things into my dorm room?"

"No. Not really." Harry replied. "It was magic, Hermione."

She snorted, and restarted her breakfast.

Dumbledore approached them during breakfast, clearing his throat from behind Harry. "That was excellent, Harry. Thank you for sharing it with us."

"Sir."

The gratitude out of the way, Dumbledore turned to the others. "Ladies and gentlemen, did Harry pass on my request to check your Occlumency barriers?"

"He did, sir." Hermione said, speaking for the others.

"And what did he suggest?" Dumbledore asked, genuinely curious.

"He suggested that we each make our own decision, sir." Hermione said firmly. "However, one thing all seven of us agree on is that we would never allow Snape to probe our minds. This is non-negotiable."

"That's Professor Snape, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said firmly, "and please believe me; Severus Snape is a trusted member of the faculty here at Hogwarts. He would not hurt you or attempt to do anything other than check your barriers."

Hermione snorted. "By hurting Harry, Headmaster, he hurts us. Besides, we don't trust him, since he's done nothing to prove his trustworthiness. We prefer to investigate things for ourselves, sir, instead of blindly trusting someone's word."

Dumbledore sighed. "Do you not think that I have investigated Professor Snape? I know that he is trustworthy. However, I will not force the issue. Would you care for me to make the check?"

"Why do we need this check, sir?" Blaise asked.

"Building Occlumency barriers is long and difficult work, Mr. Zabini." Dumbledore said. "Harry informed me that he isn't capable of Legilimency, so he would have no way of checking if your barriers were effective. When an official teacher is training a student, they frequently attempt to breach the barriers, to check that they are solid."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Understood, sir. That would explain the little 'tingle' sensations we get every so often, wouldn't it?"

"Possibly." Dumbledore said slowly. "When you have you received these 'tingles'?"

Harry knew exactly when. During Potions class.

“Every so often, sir.” Hermione said dismissively, knowing that if Harry didn’t trust Dumbledore, then there would be a very good reason, and she decided to follow his lead. “You can check mine if you wish, sir.”

Dumbledore’s twinkle became even more pronounced as he stared into Hermione’s eyes. “That’s a novel approach, Miss Granger. Where are the books?”

“Oh, you need authorisation to read in my library, sir.” Hermione said smugly. “I assume you couldn’t see anything?”

“Well, I could see empty shelves and a desk, Miss Granger.” Dumbledore said. “That’s an excellent set-up. Instead of preventing access to the mind, you simply hide everything inside. That could be even more effective than Mr. Potter’s.”

“Thank you, sir.” Hermione said, not glowing under the praise. She didn’t trust the old man. The eye-twinkling thing told her that he did it far too often.

“Would anyone else like me to try?”

Susan nodded, looking into the Headmaster’s eyes. After a moment, Dumbledore blinked. “Curious... is that the Hospital Wing?”

“An approximation, Headmaster.” Susan replied. “Of course, there’s more... active defences available, should they be needed.”

“Oh?”

“Yes... Madam Pomfrey with too many arms and a scalpel in each hand.” Susan said with a grin. “Truly the evil queen of medicine.”

Harry shuddered. There’s a truly terrifying image.

Blaise was next, staring at Dumbledore with that damnable Slytherin smirk on his face. A second after Dumbledore looked into his eyes, he took a step back, his face lighting up with fear.

“Won’t you step into my parlour, Headmaster?” Blaise asked, the smirk widening.

“An Acromantula as a defender, Mr. Zabini? When have you ever seen an Acromantula?”

“Oh... you’d be surprised the things you can learn in the library, sir.” Blaise said.

“What’ve you got?” Harry asked, genuinely curious.

“Before you can get into my mind, there’s a massive web.” Blaise replied, still smirking. Bastard. “And there’s a forty-foot Acromantula with my face on it.”

“Creepy.” Harry said, shuddering slightly. “I don’t like Acromantulas.”

“Most people don’t.” Blaise said airily. “What better defender?”

“True.” Dumbledore said. “Mr. Longbottom? Miss Patil?”

Padma nodded slowly. “Unfortunately, I couldn’t think of anything, so I copied Harry’s. I have no idea what his ship is, though, so I chose the Portkey box.”

Again, Dumbledore twinkled as he stared at Padma, shivering slightly. “Yes... effective. I won’t touch the outside of the box again. I remember what happened last time...” He nodded, before turning to Neville. At Neville’s brusque nod, Dumbledore stared. “Good lord... Professor Sprout would be proud, Mr...” He trailed off. “Where is the exit, Mr. Longbottom?”

With a smirk nearly identical to Blaise’s, Neville released the Headmaster’s mind. Dumbledore’s head snapped back slightly. He reached up and began massaging his temples. “Yes... that’s... that’ll work, Mr. Longbottom.”

He looked at Luna. "Would you like me to try yours, Miss Lovegood?"

Dumbledore stared at Luna for a moment, before trembling slightly. "What the devil's that, Miss Lovegood?"

"A Crumple-Horned Snorkack, Headmaster." Luna said serenely. "You might want to leave now. Mika doesn't like intruders."

Dumbledore nodded, turning away and breaking eye-contact. "Excellently done, all of you. With some work, those barriers will become even stronger, keeping your minds impenetrable." He nodded once, before turning away.

"Ooh, I bet that pissed him off." Harry said, copying Blaise's smirk. "He hates not being able to probe people's minds. Snape, too."

The 'caw' of the owls announced the arrival of the mail. There seemed to be more than normal, too. Then again, that wasn't really surprising on Valentines... until a small army of owls broke away and headed for Harry.

"Oh, crap..." He muttered, slamming his head onto the table, fortunately missing his plate of breakfast. "I hate this..."

By the time all the mail had been removed, Harry had eighty-one letters, cards and gifts. The others were no use, either, since they wouldn't stop sniggering. Bastards. Harry pushed his breakfast to one side, and began opening the mail. Marriage contract. Marriage contract. Thong... huh. Marriage contract. Card. Card. Marriage contract. Used thong... Ew. Hermione stopped laughing when she saw the underwear, realising that it was a little more serious.

"Do you need a hand, Harry?" She asked.

"Yep." He replied, putting another two marriage contracts onto the pile. "I hate this. I'm the most eligible bachelor in the Wizarding world, and I'm twelve. It's just... just wrong."

“Oi, ‘Arry Potter?” An angry dwarf said, stomping up behind Harry. “I’ve got a musical valentine for you.”

Harry blinked. “I’ll give you five galleons if you don’t deliver it.”

The dwarf shrugged. “Deal.”

Fishing into his pocket, Harry handed the five galleons over, sending the dwarf on his way. “So... what else have we got?”

After sorting through the pile, five cards, his bank statement and seventy-five marriage contracts. Each of them would require a handwritten response in declination. “Well... I know what homework I’m doing tonight.” He said with a sigh.

That evening, in the common room, Hermione cornered him. “Here. I got you a card.” She said with a blush. “I didn’t want to embarrass you by giving it you in public.”

“You wouldn’t embarrass me.” Harry said softly. “But, thank you.”

He took the card and opened it. Inside was a short simple message, in Hermione’s impeccable hand-writing.

To Harry,
You are my sun during the day, the earth beneath my feet, the stars during the night.
You are my everything.
Love,
Hermione

He looked up, tears in his eyes. “Thank you.” He wrapped her in a tight hug, feeling his throat swell with unexpressed emotion. Hermione hugged him back fiercely, knowing that he wasn’t good at stating his emotions, but knowing what he was trying to communicate.

“You’re welcome.”

A few days after Valentine, Harry subtly made his way down to the first floor. As he remembered, the floor outside Myrtle’s bathroom was

flooded, and he could hear her sobbing inside. Taking a deep breath, and gathering a hefty portion of his courage, he entered the bathroom.

“Hey, Myrtle!” He said cheerfully.

The girl looked up, stopping sobbing instantly. “Hello, Harry.” She said, in what she thought was a seductive manner.

Somehow managing to avoid wrinkling his nose in disgust, since necrophilia had never been one of his kinks, he swallowed back the bile. “Are you okay? I heard you crying.”

“I’m fine.” Myrtle replied. “I was sitting here, crying, someone came in, and threw a book through me!”

“Threw a book through you?” Harry repeated. “That’s a bit tasteless, isn’t it? Not to mention bloody rude.”

“I know.” Myrtle agreed. “Whoever it was, they were arguing, but I didn’t hear anyone else.”

“Oh.” Harry nodded. “Where’s the book, then?”

“The girl took it with her.” Myrtle replied. “By the sounds of the argument, she lost. So, she grabbed the book and left.”

Oh, bollocks. Harry thought. That means that the Horcrux has a tighter hold on her this time than originally. Is this because I took it from her? Is it possible that I advanced the timescale? “Okay, Myrtle. Do you need anything?”

“Well... if you ever have some free time, come and sit with me for a while.” Myrtle said. “And when you die, you’re free to share my toilet with me.”

“Thank you, Myrtle.” Harry replied politely. “I’ll... keep that in mind.”

Nodding politely, he left the bathroom. This is not good. Need to find-

"No, Harry." Luna said, less than a foot from his back. "You haven't altered the timescale. It will still happen as it did. Ginny's not as strong this time around. Probably because you didn't spend the summer with the Weasleys."

Harry sighed. "How do you creep up on people, Luna?" He asked.

"No-one really pays attention, Harry, especially to little Loony Lovegood. I've never snuck up on you, though."

"I do pay attention." Harry replied. "So, things are carrying on the same?"

Luna blinked for a moment, then nodded. "Near enough, Harry. There is one more attack to come. You know which one."

Yes, I do. Hermione... Not this time. "I won't let that happen, Luna. You know that."

"I do. The timescale has not changed for that attack, either." She smiled at him. "You know where it will be, Harry. You know what to do."

As February ended and March approached, the second years were instructed to choose their electives for third through fifth year. Several of the older years saw the gang sitting on the couch, knowing that they were a fiercely intelligent bunch, and wandered over to offer some advice and support.

Harry chuckled as one of the giggly seventh years offered advice. "Well, you have five options. Arithmancy, which is basically a maths class, and really hard. Ancient Runes, which is dull as dirt, Divination, which I took and I think it's fascinating. Professor Trelawney says I have a gift."

Somehow, Harry managed to avoid rolling his eyes. It was a damned close thing, though.

"Then you've got Care of Magical Creatures, but Professor Kettleburn's really old, and missing a good number of body-parts, so I

don't think he's the best teacher, really. Finally, you've got Muggle Studies. I took that, too. Not sure if it's accurate, though."

Penny Clearwater, the First-Generation sixth year prefect, snorted. "It's really not. It's about eighty years out of date, and it's taught by a pureblood who, based on their knowledge, has never stepped foot in the Muggle world."

Harry looked at his parchment. "Well, that's Muggle Studies out of the way. Besides, I'm non-magic raised. I could probably teach them a few things." Since I have knowledge of technology and computer code that would make them drool with envy. "I don't fancy Divination, either. You can't predict the future, and the idea of prophecy seems like complete bollocks to me." He ticked the remaining three options. "I think I'm gonna pick Arithmancy, 'cause I like math, Ancient Runes and Care."

Hermione looked down at her parchment, and ticked all five, as Harry had known she would.

Neville was looking at Harry closely. "You know more than anyone else, Harry. What would you suggest for me?"

Sucking air through his teeth, Harry leaned back. "I won't suggest anything for you, Neville. You'll need to make your own choice. But, I've looked into the subjects, so I can give you an overview of them, if you'd like."

"Please." Neville said gratefully.

"Okay." Harry steepled his fingers together. "Arithmancy, as much as it's described as math class, is so much more. It deals with the mechanics of spell-casting. The formulae of spells and magic. Personally, I like it because it means that you can, in theory, create new spells, or modify existing ones."

Neville nodded slowly. "Hard work?"

"Very. But rewarding. It's taught by Septima Vector, (curious that the teacher has a math name, don't you think?) one of the youngest

Arithmancy masters in the field. She gained her mastery five years ago, at the tender age of 24. The textbook we'll be using is Numerology and Gramatica. Hermione's got a copy in her library trunk."

Neville nodded, before ticking his parchment, closely followed by Padma, Susan and Blaise.

"The next one is Ancient Runes. This is an incredibly complex subject, but the effects of runes are immense. Most of the Portkey box is based on runes, from the security features to the reactor itself. Runes are used in ward schemes, and is one of the main qualifications needed for a curse-breaker.

"Again, this subject is hard work and difficult, but with the right materials, you can pick it up and create an immense number of useful things. The teaching is Professor Bathsheba Babbling, and she's the third best Rune Mistress in the world. The two better currently work for the Ministry and Gringotts."

The four second years again ticked their parchments, with Blaise looking up at Harry. "You think we could see some of the runes you use on the Box."

"Suppose." Harry said softly. "They're... complex, though." As in 'post-mastery' level.

"Okay. Care of Magical Creatures pretty much speaks for itself. We all had to get a copy of Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them at the beginning of first year. We'll end up dealing with most of the creatures in that book, from Flobberworms up to Hippogriffs. I don't know much about Professor Kettleburn, but according to the grapevine, he might not be around too much longer anyway. I think it's a useful subject because you never know when you might come across a magical creature."

Again, the four were ticking their parchment. Harry glanced round the common room to see every second year listening intently to him. With a shrug, he carried on. "Divination... personally, I think it's a bloody waste of time, but that's just me. I mean, I know that there are true

seers, but if you're not one, Divination's no use to you. As a non-seer, learning to read tea leaves is a bit of a useless skill."

Luna cleared her throat, smirking at Harry.

"The final subject is Muggle Studies. I've looked at the text book. Penny's guess at being eighty years out of date is accurate. There's only the haziest mention of cars and trains, virtually nothing on planes, nothing on television, CDs or the internet. No mobiles phones, no computers... and having a pureblood teach it is pointless beyond belief. You should have at least a First-Generation teach it, or even better, a squib who's been living in the non-magical world." Like Arabella Figg, for example.

"What's an 'internet'?" Terry Boot asked. "I've never heard of one."

Harry shook his head. "Terry, there is only one internet. Think of... think of a library that can be accessed by anyone, anywhere. It has hundreds of reference sources, from cooking recipes to information regarding nuclear physics. Not to mention enough porn to last your lifetime."

Terry nodded, suitably impressed, while several girls gave Harry dirty looks. "What? I don't use porn. But, I know it's there."

"So, in your opinion," Lisa Turpin asked, "the best courses are Arithmancy, Ancient Runes and Care of Magical Creatures?"

Harry shook his head. "I never said that. They're the best for me. If you've ever had a vision of the future, or a prophetic dream, sign up for Divination. It's possible that course may help you enhance your gift. Don't just take my opinion on the matter. Look into it yourself, and see what you come up with."

The portrait hole opened up, revealing Professor Flitwick. "Mr. Potter?"

"Professor. You're looking rather cheery this morning, sir. Can I assume that Professor Lockhart's had a horrific accident and will be disfigured and hospitalised?" Harry looked hopeful.

Several of the older girls glared at Harry, then at Flitwick when he answered, "No... not yet. We can but hope, Mr. Potter."

"Indeed we can, sir. Indeed we can. So, what can I do for you, Professor?"

"The headmaster has asked to speak to you, Harry, regarding your course choices."

"Oh?" Harry rolled up his parchment, handing it to Professor Flitwick. "I've already made my choices, sir, but I'll be pleased to speak to the Headmaster."

"Ah, Harry. Good to see you. Won't you come in, please?" Dumbledore boomed cheerily. "How's your schoolwork coming along?"

Harry sat down, turning down one of the tainted lemon drops. "Fine, sir. Thank you for asking. Professor Flitwick said you wanted to speak to me about my electives, sir?"

"Indeed." Dumbledore folded his hands on the desk. "I was wondering if you'd made your choices."

"The notice was only posted this morning, Headmaster." Harry said.

"True, but I know you, Harry. You've no doubt researched the subjects that we offer, and have already made your decision."

Harry chuckled. "I have indeed, sir."

"Excellent, excellent. May I ask what subjects you've chosen?"

"Arithmancy, Ancient Runes and Care of Magical Creatures, sir. They seemed the most interesting courses."

Dumbledore nodded, a small smile on his face. Harry could tell, though, that the smile was definitely forced. "May I ask why you decided against Divination, Harry?"

Harry frowned slightly. "Since I'm not a seer, sir, nor have I ever had a prophetic dream, I don't really believe in the subject. Seems very... inexact to me, sir. I prefer something a little more factual."

Dumbledore nodded again. "Perhaps, Harry, perhaps. However, I believe that you would definitely benefit from taking Divination."

"Oh? For what reason, Headmaster?" Harry asked innocently, although he knew perfectly well why. He was hoping that if Harry was exposed to Divination and Trelawney, he'd accept the existence of the prophecy more easily.

"You never know when a skill such as Divination might be useful, Harry." Dumbledore said. "And I believe, based on your past experiences, notably saving young Mr. Finch-Fletchley, that Divination would definitely help you in your scholastic career."

"As I told you at the time, Headmaster. I didn't have a vision regarding that. I just... I just knew. I don't believe in Divination, Headmaster, and considering that most magic requires strong belief to work, I would surely fail that subject."

Dumbledore shook his head. "I believe that studying Divination would be in your best interests, Harry. You could learn a lot, and I'm sure you would excel in that class."

"I'm really not interested, Headmaster." Harry said firmly. "Unless you can give me an excellent reason, I'd prefer to keep the three electives I've chosen."

Dumbledore sighed. "I really must insist on this, Harry. Divination will undoubtedly play a strong role for you in the future, and I must insist that you attend the course."

"That's certainly your right, Headmaster." Harry said. "However, I have already made my decision on the matter. And you're stepping dangerously close to breaking that oath, sir."

“Not at all.” Dumbledore said amiably. “I vowed that I would not interfere in your life, except in the matters of your educational needs. As I stated, Divination would be a benefit to you.”

“Why?” Harry asked, chuckling. “Is there a prophecy about me or something?”

Dumbledore froze, exactly as Harry knew he would. “What makes you ask that, Harry?”

“Well, you seem to be pushing me toward Divination, sir, even though I’ve said several times that I’m not interested in the subject. I just wondered if there was a reason.”

“I ask that you trust me, Harry.” Dumbledore said sagely. “Please, drop either Arithmancy or Ancient Runes, and take up Divination instead.”

“Sorry, sir. I’ve already handed in my selection to Professor Flitwick.” Oddly enough, because I knew you couldn’t help by try something like this.

“In certain instances, Harry, I can override a person’s choices, if I feel that person’s choices are not in their best interests.” Dumbledore tried again. “Now, which subject would you rather take? Arithmancy or Ancient Runes?”

Harry’s face sobered instantly. “I would advise, sir, that you don’t try to do this. I have signed up for Care, Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, and those are the only subjects I will take. If you do sign me up for Divination, I will have no choice but to not attend the classes. If you push me on this, Headmaster, I will have to look at other educational institutions.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “You said that you wanted to work with me, Harry. Why do you distrust my judgement with regards to your education?”

“I agree, sir, that I said I’d work with you, but I never said I would unthinkingly accept your decisions. I reserve the right to make my

own choices. I have chosen.” Harry stood up. “Think about it, Headmaster, but think quickly. If you attempt to manipulate me through my choice of course, you will be in breach of the Unbreakable Vow. And you’ll die.” He turned and headed for the door. “I will be relaying this conversation to the Board of Governors and to Professors McGonagall and Flitwick, sir.” He opened the door. “Don’t push me, sir.”

Dumbledore sighed as Harry slammed the door. He will need to learn Divination. It will make the prophecy much easier for him to believe. He sighed again as he stood up. I will need to speak to Minerva and Filius as soon as possible.

Harry was fuming as he re-entered the Ravenclaw common room. Sneaky manipulative old bastard. Fortunately for Harry’s blood pressure, Flitwick was still in the common room, answering questions from the other second years about what Harry had told them.

“Mr. Potter?” Flitwick asked. “Are you well? You look... unsettled.”

“I’m bloody annoyed, sir.” Harry said brusquely. “Professor Dumbledore has decided that I must take Divination, even though I told him I’m not interested.”

Flitwick frowned. “For what possible reason would he want you in Divination? Even he doesn’t really believe it the subject. Why risk breaching the vow?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t really care, sir.” Harry replied. “I just know that I won’t take Divination. I told him if he pushes it, I’m gone. Sir, do you think you could inform Professor McGonagall about this? I don’t want him to do an end-run around me.”

Flitwick nodded. “I’m due to meet with her in an hour, Mr. Potter. I’ll relay your concerns at that point.” He looked at Harry with concern. “Could I recommend that you go and relax, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes, sir.” Harry replied. “I’ll go and find a cricket bat and some china, I think...”

Minerva McGonagall sighed. All morning, she'd been advising her second years, with the exception of Neville Longbottom, about their career choices. Several of the older years decided to scare the second years with tales of horror and woe, notably about Care of Magical Creatures. The Weasley twins were probably the worst, spreading a story about the dragons in the Forbidden Forest that were routinely fed with new third years.

A knock on her door made her look up. "Come in." She called. She smiled when she saw Flitwick's little head pop round the door.

"Is this a bad time, Minerva?"

"No. Weasley troubles." McGonagall said with a sigh. "They've been picking on the second years again. They pulled the same tricks last year, too."

Flitwick let himself into the room, climbing up on to the chair in front of her desk. "I've just had a meeting with Mr. Potter, after he returned from a meeting with the Headmaster."

McGonagall closed her eyes. "And what is Albus trying to pull now?"

Flitwick chuckled at her immediate leap to the correct conclusion. "He was trying to force young Mr. Potter into Divination." He had to smile as McGonagall's lips thinned. She hated Divination, and by association, Sybil Trelawney.

"For what possible reason could Albus be insistent on forcing Harry into that class? We all know it's next to worthless, and only the gossipy girls and people who want an easy grade even take it."

Flitwick shrugged. "I don't know. He just insisted, probably. I think we'll need to have a little chat with the Headmaster, telling him that a student's electives are things they elect to take themselves."

A knock on the door interrupted the conversation. McGonagall glanced at the mirror on her desk, which had a partner mirror outside

the door. It was a trick she'd learned from Dumbledore. "It's Albus." She looked up. "Come on in, Albus."

The door opened, and Dumbledore stepped into the office. "Ah, Minerva, Filius. I was hoping to speak to the pair of you."

"What a coincidence, Albus." Flitwick said firmly. "We were hoping to speak with you, too."

Dumbledore stepped closer, taking the other chair in front of McGonagall's desk. "I imagine it's about the same subject, too. Harry Potter."

"Indeed." Flitwick said. "Would you care to explain why you feel the need to force Mr. Potter into Divination, Albus? He's already made and submitted his choices to me, and Divination was not one of them."

Dumbledore sighed. "I have a very good reason for requesting that Mr. Potter take Divination. Unfortunately, for security reasons, I cannot reveal this reason to you. However, in this case, I must insist that Mr. Potter's electives be changed to include Divination."

McGonagall slowly shook her head. "We're going to need a better reason than 'you have a very good reason', Albus."

"Minerva, I ask that you trust me in this matter, and carry out the changes I have requested."

"No." McGonagall said firmly. "Harry has chosen against Divination, and I have no reason to attempt to override that request. I believe Filius agrees with me?"

"I do." Flitwick said, equally firmly. "Can you give us a valid reason, Albus?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "I cannot share it, but I do have one."

"Then we cannot, or rather, will not acknowledge this request, sir." McGonagall replied. "Is there anything else you wish to discuss,

Albus?" She grinned evilly. "If you're this interested, I know of several second years who'd benefit from your wisdom in selecting their courses." She stood up. "In fact, now would be an excellent time. Would you care to accompany me to the Gryffindor common room?"

Dumbledore stood up hastily. "I'm afraid I'm rather busy at the moment, Minerva. However, I would ask you to reconsider my request for Mr. Potter. Divination will serve him well."

"No." McGonagall and Flitwick said together.

When Flitwick relayed the conversation at the end of the following Charms class, Harry grinned. "Thanks, sir."

"My pleasure, Harry." Flitwick said with a smile. "If Albus can come up with a good reason, I'll take you to one side and explain it to you, and then let you make a choice, okay?"

"Fair enough, sir." Harry said. I wonder if the old man's willing to explain the prophecy about me? Nah... he kept it close to his chest last time. This time, even more since I'm not such a gullible little weapon.

As he left, he took a glance at the calendar on the wall next to the door. Shit... it's tomorrow that Hermione gets zapped. No... tomorrow is the time she would get zapped. Not this time.

While everyone else was preparing to attend the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff Quidditch match, Harry was pulling on a set of fairly tight robes, that would allow him to move quickly, just in case there was a fight on his hands.

He'd seen Hermione carrying the mirror around, just in case she heard anything suspiciously hissy on the wanderings through Hogwarts.

Harry made his way to the third floor, since McGonagall had said in the original timeline that Hermione had been found near the library. As he approached the doorway, he saw Luna, with Blaise, Neville,

Padma and Susan, each with their wands in hand, and clearly dressed for action.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked.

“Luna.” Blaise, Neville, Padma and Sue said together. “She said to be here at this time. Something about it being necessary.”

“Ah.” Harry nodded. “And let me guess; her eyes were glowing, weren’t they?”

“Yes.” They answered together. “And that’s still freaky.”

“Actually, I think it’s worse when it’s your eyes, Harry.” Susan said. “Hers glow white, but yours are green. It seems more... sinister, somehow.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Sinister? Me?”

“Yes. Sinister. You.” Susan mimicked. “We both know that you can be sinister. Remember, I’ve heard some of your evil cackles. Poor Oliver Wood...”

“Ah, Harry.” Dumbledore’s voice came from behind him.

Shit! Harry thought angrily. Not now, old man. Not now! Swallowing back his anger, he turned. “Headmaster?”

“What are you all doing here?” He asked amiably. “I thought you’d be heading down to the Quidditch match. I’m just on my way there now. I’d be honoured to walk with you. While we’re heading down, I’m sure we’d be able to carry on our discussion with regards to elective selection.”

“I’m afraid we have plans for the moment, sir. We decided to not attend the Quidditch match.”

“Oh?” Dumbledore asked, his eyes narrowing slightly. “What are your plans? Maybe it’s something I could help you with. After all, I’ve been here a long time, and have plenty of life experience.”

Harry snarled quietly. "Not right now, sir. Got something to do..." He trailed off as he heard a scream. In that instant, Harry had enough anger to perform an AK or a Crucio with absolutely no problems. "Excuse me, sir."

He set off at a run, heading down the corridor. When he came to the junction, he let out a pulse of magic, detecting Blink already flowing down one of the pipes. He looked down, seeing Hermione and Penny Clearwater petrified.

I could have stopped this if the old fucker hadn't got in the way! He thought angrily, glaring heavily at Dumbledore. The old man was pale-faced as he looked upon Harry's angry face.

"No." Harry said firmly. "I won't let this happen." He looked up, summoning every inch of magic, before fixing Dumbledore in a glare. "If you hadn't gotten in our way, Dumbledore, I could have stopped this." He pointed at the old man, his hand beginning to glow an oh-so-familiar green. The green of an Avada Kedavra...

Author's Note: I do not own the Righteous Brothers. I shouldn't need to tell you that, but I'll just make sure.

– CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE –

Rage, Anger and Justice

Last Time on Quantum Leap...

“No.” Harry said firmly. “I won’t let this happen.” He looked up, summoning every inch of magic, before fixing Dumbledore in a glare. “If you hadn’t gotten in our way, Dumbledore, I could have stopped this.” He pointed at the old man, his hand beginning to glow an oh-so-familiar green. The green of an Avada Kedavra...

Harry suddenly looked down at Hermione, pressing his glowing green hands against her now-rock solid stomach. The magic in his hands began to pulse as it passed from Harry into Hermione.

“What are you doing?” Dumbledore asked, shaken by the rage, by the pain, by the hatred he’d seen in Harry’s eyes for that moment. For just a second, he didn’t see Harry Potter, the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’. He saw another former student, who’d embraced the darkness like a lover and been corrupted utterly.

Is it too late to save the boy from the fate of Voldemort? He asked himself. Have I already failed?

Harry didn’t bother dealing with Dumbledore’s foolishness at the moment. He was concentrating on the most important thing on the entire planet: Hermione. His Hermione. He was feeding all his raw power, which was considerably more than anyone else at Hogwarts, with the possible (unlikely) exception of Dumbledore, could command, directly into her body, attempting to reject the magic that was holding the Petrification.

Come on... come on! Harry roared mentally.

“Harry, step away.” Dumbledore said firmly, gathering his wits. “We shall take her to Madam Pomfrey. I’m sure there is more of the mandrake draught available. If not, Professor Sprout’s mandrakes should be ready within the next two months.”

Luna couldn't help herself; she sniggered. When the others began to look at her oddly, she shook her head. "He will not live two months without Hermione, Headmaster. Two hours is too long." Her eyes began to glow as she stepped behind Harry, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"I give of myself." She said softly, channelling all the magic she could spare into her hand, so that it could flow into the fallen girl. Harry felt the boost in power, less than a tenth of his own, but he appreciated the gesture.

"Thank.. you..." He gasped, channelling the extra into Hermione. Underneath his hands, he could feel the battle that was taking place in Hermione's body. His magic, attempting to force the ancient and powerful magic of the basilisk out.

Neville glanced at Blaise, who nodded, stepping behind Harry, and placing their hands on his other shoulder and back respectively. "We give of ourselves." They intoned, copying Luna and forcing power into Harry's body, where it flowed into Hermione.

Susan and Padma glanced at each other and nodded, before stepping behind Blaise and Neville, and sending their power into the lads to forward on to Harry. "We give of ourselves."

Dumbledore watched in shock and awe as Harry wielded the power of six witches and wizards. He knew the Muggle axiom of 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely', and having five additional cores feeding into his own would undoubtedly make him feel invulnerable.

"Not... enough..." Harry gasped, feeling the power pouring through him. Harry's thoughts regarding all that energy as his to command was radically different from Dumbledore's. He hated it. Every nerve felt like it was on fire, but even that wasn't enough to stop him trying to help Hermione.

"I call on the power of all those combined!" Gathering his strength, he thrust one arm up to the ceiling. "Arx, I need you!"

I am there, young Heir. I give of myself to help your love.

From the ceiling, a bolt of lightning erupted, landing on Harry's outstretched fingers. He screamed as it flowed down his arm, across his shoulders and into his other arm. Hermione's icy skin warmed dramatically as the energy entered her.

I can only give you one more, Heir. The risk to yourself is extreme.

Do it! Harry commanded, forgetting that he was being rude to an extremely powerful magical artefact that could no doubt vaporise him in the blink of an eye.

By your command. Another bolt of lightning erupted from the ceiling, causing Harry's hand to burst into flame. Wincing, Harry kept his hand extended, allowing the energy to pass into Hermione again. As soon as it entered her chest, she gasped, sitting up and coughing.

Harry allow his hand to drop, and slumped backwards. Hermione looked around, seeing Harry cradling his burned hand. "What happened?"

"You were petrified." Luna said matter-of-factly. "Harry cured you."

"Oh..." Hermione scuttled closer to Harry, taking his burned hand and looking at it. "How?"

Harry chuckled mirthlessly. "I infused you with all my power, trying to drive the petrifying magic out. The others helped, but it wasn't enough, even with all six of us."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Would you care to explain, Mr. Potter?"

"No." Harry replied, managing to keep the growl out of his voice. "Perhaps, sir," his tone was like ice, "you should take Miss Clearwater to the Hospital Wing."

Dumbledore straightened up to his not-inconsiderable height. "Allow me to clarify, Mr. Potter: you will explain what happened. What is 'Arx'?"

"Hogwarts." Luna said softly. "Harry called upon Hogwarts herself to help, and she did."

Harry glared at Dumbledore. "Now you know, Headmaster. Shouldn't you help Miss Clearwater?"

"There is much for us to discuss, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore said sharply. "This kind of magic—"

"Sir, this isn't the best time." Hermione interrupted. "Harry's injured, and clearly needs to go to the hospital wing." She helped Harry to his feet, using his good hand.

"So do you, My Only." Harry said softly, scooping her up into his arms, bridal style.

"Harry, I can walk." Hermione said, snuggling closer.

"Shh." He whispered soothingly.

"But this is nice, too." Hermione wrapped her arms around Harry's neck, keeping one eye on his burned hand. "Come on."

Neville cast Mobilicorpus on Penelope, following Harry down the corridor.

Dumbledore scowled and fell into step behind them. He had questions for Potter. Oh, yes... he had questions.

Once in the Hospital Wing, Harry carefully lowered Hermione onto a bed, while Neville placed the petrified Penny onto a second bed.

"What now?" Poppy asked, exasperated.

Harry looked up. "Hermione was attacked by the basilisk, Madam Pomfrey. I managed to reverse the Petrification, but I'd like you to check her out, just to make sure."

Poppy blinked at the casual mention of a Basilisk, but went to work. As she ran her wand over Hermione, she carried on chatting. "Are you injured, Harry?"

"Might have picked up a little burn during the procedure." Harry said, keeping his hand behind his back. "It's nothing, ma'am. Hermione's the important one here."

Poppy nodded absently, knowing that Harry was, at best, a piss-poor patient and at worse, an easy contender for Mission: Impossible-style escapes. "I'll have a look at it when I'm done. What about Miss Clearwater?"

"She's still petrified, ma'am." Harry said. "I only had enough for one. And... well..."

"I understand, Harry." Poppy said, completing her scan. And she did. Even if neither Harry nor Hermione admitted it, they were completely in love with each other. Of course, had she asked Harry, he'd have admitted it, free and clear. "Well, Miss Granger... you're in good health. However, I would strongly advise you not to cast any magic for the next few days."

"Oh?" Hermione was suddenly scared. "Why?"

Poppy chuckled. "At this precise moment, your magical core is radically overcharged. You could probably levitate the entire castle into orbit. You'll need time to let the excess magic drain out. You'll also notice a marked drop in your appetite over the next couple of days, and you won't sleep either. I suggest you eat normally, regardless of how hungry you feel, and try and rest."

Dumbledore was listening in at the door. "Now that you know Miss Granger will be fine, Harry, I would like a word. It is important."

Harry nodded as he held out his hand to Poppy, who winced when she saw the first-degree burns. "You may ask."

"What did you do?" Dumbledore asked brusquely.

"As I stated in the corridor, I infused a good portion of my magic into Hermione, to combat the Petrification. Blaise, Neville, Padma, Sue and Luna did the same, except they channelled the power into me, and I passed it into Hermione."

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I'm concerned that you know how to do such a thing, Harry. Manipulating your magical core like that can be dangerous."

"It can also help save a life, sir." Harry replied. "I know what you're worried about. However, this falls under our Unbreakable Vow, and I'll thank you to leave me alone for a time, sir. If you hadn't gotten in the way..." He let himself trail off, biting down on his bottom lip as Poppy spread a wretched-smelling salve over the burns.

Dumbledore shook his head. "What about what you shouted? 'Arx'? Is that some kind of spell?"

"No." Harry grunted as Poppy began wrapping a bandage round his hand.

"Then what is it? I've never heard it before."

How very sad for you... not being able to communicate with the castle. Harry thought. She's a god send. Thank you, Arx.

You are welcome, young heir. How is your injury?

Hurts like a bitch. Harry replied, before turning to Dumbledore. "I called on Hogwarts herself to help, Headmaster. She consented, and supplied me with additional power."

Dumbledore reeled. "You took power from the castle itself?" His face grew stormy. "Do you know what you've done?"

“Yes.”

“You could have allowed the wards to fail!” Dumbledore snapped suddenly. “Harry, what you did was reckless, dangerous and foolish.”

“So you say, sir.” Harry replied, his voice like ice. “But, you’ll find that the wards haven’t fallen, nor have I damaged the school in any way, shape or form.” He flexed his fingers slightly. “Now, why don’t you carry on with what you were doing, Headmaster?”

“Do not speak to me like that, Mr. Potter.” Dumbledore said, his voice as cold as Harry’s. “You are too young to understand the responsibility I have to my students. Such reckless stunts as what you did could have caused a problem for everyone. Never do it again!” I believe it’s time for young Harry to be... re-educated as to his status here. I believe Severus will help me with this. Dumbledore turned on his heel. “You will have one month’s detention with Professor Snape for these actions, Harry, doing whatever tasks he feels are a suitable punishment.”

“I don’t think so.” McGonagall said from the doorway, looking into the room. Beside her, Flitwick was red in the face in pure rage. “I received an automatic summons from the school, Albus, telling me to report here.”

Dumbledore scowled at her. “Deputy Headmistress, remember your place. Mr. Potter’s foolish stunt could have had dangerous repercussions on everyone at the school. He will serve the detention I have assigned him.”

McGonagall looked up, closing her eyes for a moment. Harry could almost feel her communicating with the school, like a conversation in another room. “No, he won’t.” McGonagall said after a moment. “There was no danger to the school, Albus. Now, if you insist on pushing this, I shall have no choice but to escalate this to a higher authority.”

Harry cleared his throat. “You know, Headmaster, if you weren’t so angry, you’d be noticing that pain in your chest right about now.”

Dumbledore knew very well that he was pushing the oath, but he let the pain in his chest fuel his anger. "Do not speak, Mr. Potter. You are in enough trouble. If you push me, even an inch, I will have no choice but to expel you for your utter foolishness."

"Albus, the school was in no danger. The only thing Harry did that was against the rules was performing magic in the corridor." Flitwick turned to Harry. "One point from Ravenclaw for breaking a basic school rule."

Dumbledore was livid. The boy is already performing Dark magic, and they ignore it. Are they all blind? It is good I am here, ready to stop him.

The hospital doors opened, revealing Padma, clutching a cauldron. "Harry, I brought the rest of that mandrake juice." He passed the cauldron across to Poppy. "Did you add me into the lock on the Portkey box.. thing?"

"Yeah." Harry said. "Over Christmas. All seven of us now have full access."

Dumbledore gasped as he felt an angry presence invade his mind. Since he was Headmaster, he was anchored to the school, and he knew that it was angry with him. If he carried on with his present course of action, he knew he'd be facing problems. "I will forego the detentions at this time, Mr. Potter. However, I will be watching you. If you put another foot out of line, I will see you expelled and brought up on charges."

"Sir." Harry replied politely. He held out his arm to Hermione, who looped her own arm through. "Madam Pomfrey, thank you for your usual wretched potions and meticulous care."

"You're welcome, Harry." She said warmly. "You'll need to come back tomorrow to have the salve and bandages changed."

"Yes, ma'am." Harry looked at the teachers. "Professors, if you'll excuse me?" He led the seven students out, leaving Poppy with a

cauldron full of tan goop, that she had to pour down Penny Clearwater's throat.

McGonagall grabbed Dumbledore's arm, and began dragging him out of the hospital wing, Flitwick falling in behind them. Once in the waiting room, and clearly out of everyone's vision, McGonagall released Dumbledore. "Would you care to explain just what the bloody hell you're playing at?" She snapped. "Are you trying to annoy that young man?"

Dumbledore frowned, before letting his face fall into a disappointed mask, an expression he'd perfected over many years of staring over the top of his glasses at misbehaving students. "Minerva, you know, in your heart of hearts, that what Harry did was wrong. Pulling magic from the school itself? You know the risks involved with that, and you know the possibility of it changing Harry. This kind of action is used by Dark witches and wizards, and allowing him to carry on doing this is simply pushing him towards the Darkness."

McGonagall shook her head in sorrow. "You're a bloody fool sometimes, Albus. He didn't pull magic from the school. You can't pull magic from Hogwarts. The wards themselves will not allow someone to drain them. Instead, he was given power by the school. I felt Hogwarts herself donate some of her surplus energy to Harry."

Dumbledore shook his head. "That's not possible. I would have felt it myself."

"Yes, you should have." McGonagall said. "Perhaps because you were busy making up delusions about Harry turning Dark, you didn't bloody notice!" She sighed angrily. "Now, I think you should apologise to that young man, again, for your pigheadedness."

With a sigh, Dumbledore nodded. "You didn't see his face, Minerva, when he found Miss Granger. I've only ever seen that rage before in one person."

"Harry is not Voldemort, Albus." McGonagall said. "He couldn't be. It's simply not in him."

“His eyes, Minerva. There was such rage in them...”

“Because of Miss Granger, Albus. If anyone tried to take Miss Granger from him, worry for them. Not for Harry. Never for Harry. He’s as light as anyone I know, Albus. He will fight for the light, not for the Dark.” She felt an overwhelming urge to slap the old fool. “Now, tomorrow, or Monday preferably, you will apologise to that young man, and you will mean it. No more accusations.”

While Hermione was having a shower, since it felt like her skin was crawling thanks to the excess magic, Luna pulled Harry to one side. “Harry, I know what you’re thinking.” Luna said.

“Do you?” Harry snarled.

“Yes, I do. You know you can’t do this.”

“Yes, I can.”

“Okay... you shouldn’t do this.”

Harry stopped, staring intently at Luna, who wasn’t fazed in the slightest. “She attacked Hermione, Luna. The little bitch had the nerve to attack my Hermione!”

“I know, Harry. And I know the rage that’s pumping through your veins at this very moment. I share your anger. Obviously, not to the same degree, but you know that you can’t do this. Not yet.”

Harry growled and slammed his fist into the wall. Ancient stone met calcium bone. His fingers were intact; the wall broke. “It’s wrong, Luna. What the fuck was I thinking?”

“You were thinking that you wanted to make it all better. You did the right thing, Harry. But if you do this, here, now... you’ll be doing the wrong thing. You know that as well as I do.”

He sighed, resting his head on the wall. “I hate this, Luna. I could do so much good, right now...”

“And risk a greater evil, Harry.” Luna said, resting a hand on his back. “Go to Hermione, Harry. You need her, especially now.”

He chuckled dryly. “She’s having a shower. While I’d probably enjoy the show-”

“You pervy prat.” Luna said fondly. “When she comes down, Harry, give her a cuddle. It calms you down, I know it does.”

“Yes, it does.” Harry said fondly, before sighing. “Why is Dumbledore so determined to have a conflict with me, Luna?”

“Why do you ask questions to which you already know the answer?” Luna returned, smiling at him. “Dumbledore will be sorted out in time, Harry. You know that as well as I do. Just be patient.”

Harry snorted. “It’s like the messy hair and green eyes; Patience doesn’t really fit into my genetic make-up, Luna.”

Over the next few days, Harry saw Dumbledore looking at him mournfully, but he casually blanked the old man. He was still utterly pissed at Dumbledore getting in the way when Hermione was petrified, and the accusations and attempted manipulations afterwards.

On Monday, McGonagall held Harry back after class. “Would you care to join me in my office, Harry?”

Following her into her sanctum, he sat down, and accepted her offer of tea and biscuits. “How’s the hand feeling, Harry?”

Harry looked down at the bandaged limb. “It feels okay at the moment, ma’am.” He replied politely. “I think it’ll be fine in a day or so.”

“Good, good.” McGonagall said. “After you left the infirmary on Saturday, I spoke to Albus. I told him to apologise to you about his accusations. Has he done so yet?”

Harry shook his head. "Not yet, ma'am." He replied. "But, he's been giving me piteous glances all weekend. I think he's trying to soften me up."

"Indeed I am." Dumbledore said from the doorway. "I'm sorry, Harry. I know that I went too far."

"It won't work, though." Harry replied, not bothering to turn around. "Time and time again, I've been pushed, even though I've warned you. You just won't leave me alone. So, I've decided to leave you alone."

Dumbledore sighed. "I'm sorry, Harry. I should never have accused you of being reckless. Professor McGonagall informed me that there was no danger."

"As I did." Harry said, looking over his shoulder. "Let me guess; you accused me of embracing the Dark, didn't you?"

"I... How do you know?"

"You think that I enjoyed having all that power racing through me." Harry said sagely. "I didn't. It burned, Headmaster. We were never meant to wield that kind of power. I know that. I'd just as soon never do that again."

"I'm sorry, Harry." Dumbledore said mournfully. "I believed that there was a genuine danger, to all of us."

Harry shrugged. "I can't help your beliefs, Headmaster. But, it doesn't matter anymore. From this moment forth, I will have nothing to do with you, unless it directly relates to my schooling. I revoke my invitation to my home and any association with you." Dumbledore's head flashed for a moment as the knowledge of Harry's flat in Diagon Alley was removed. The old man reeled for a moment as he realised he'd lost something.

"Harry..."

"I no longer recognise your right to call me by my first name." Harry said. "From now on, I am Lord Potter, second year Ravenclaw student. Nothing more."

McGonagall sighed, but she couldn't really blame Harry. The meddlesome old man had done this to himself.

"Don't worry, Professor." Harry said supportively to her. "I still like you. You're free to call me Harry."

"Thank you." The old woman said, feeling oddly touched by his casual statement.

Dumbledore wasn't prepared to let go. "Harry, I understand that you're upset with me, but there's no need to be childish about it. If you had my responsibilities, you'd have been concerned at the prospect of someone taking power from the school."

Harry snorted slightly. "Is he serious?" He asked McGonagall. "If I was embracing the Darkness, would I have defeated Quirrell last year? Or more importantly, would I have returned the Philosopher's Stone? No, I'd have kept it for myself." He shook his head "Is there anything else, ma'am?"

McGonagall shook her head. "Not at the moment, Harry."

"Yes, ma'am."

After Harry left, Dumbledore looked mournfully at McGonagall. "I fear I may have lost Mr. Potter."

McGonagall's eyes narrowed. "Really?" She asked sarcastically. "What was your first clue?" She sighed. "Leave him alone from now on, Albus. Don't interfere with him, don't try and 'mould' him into anything. Just leave him be." She saw Dumbledore's mouth open. "And don't start with that Divination rubbish again. He's made his choice."

Dumbledore sighed and nodded. "Very well."

Back in his office, Dumbledore took one of the laced Lemon Drops from his desk, relaxing as the calming potion took effect.

No... this is definitely a set back in my relationship with Harry. But it doesn't matter. When Voldemort returns, Harry will have no choice but to come to me for training. This is merely a slight bump in the road. Harry will need my help.

Since the attack on Hermione and Penny was the fated fourth attack, Harry knew that the Board of Governors, headed by the bastard Lucius Malfoy, would shortly be ordering Dumbledore's removal. While Harry wouldn't have pissed on Dumbledore if he was on fire after his recent actions, he didn't want him out of the way.

There were two reasons for that; the first was that Dumbledore was one of the strongest wizards in the world, and it was beneficial to have him at Hogwarts. The second was proved by the old adage 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer'. While Dumbledore wasn't currently an enemy, he certainly had the potential to become one, very quickly.

The second thing that Harry wanted to change was with regards to the groundskeeper. Harry had snuck down to Hagrid's hut to speak to the man. He knew what was coming here, and he'd be damned if he let Hagrid be sent to Azkaban for a crime he didn't commit, and his rock cakes, while a crime in general and on teeth in particular, didn't warrant time in the dankest hole imaginable.

"Harry... you shouldn't be down here." Hagrid said, bustling the boy inside and near-throwing him into the armchair. He quickly busied himself with making a pot of tea.

"Problems, Hagrid?" Harry asked, pointing to the crossbow behind the door, which could probably be classed as a small siege weapon.

"You can't be too careful." Hagrid replied cagily, pouring a bucket-sized cup of tea for Harry. "Now, what brings you down here?"

"I... I heard a rumour, Hagrid." Harry said, blowing on his tea to cool it slightly, realising the futility of trying to cool about 8 litres of tea by

blowing on it. Should've brought my trunks and gone for a swim in it. "About the Chamber of Secrets. According to this rumour, it was opened fifty years ago..." He trailed off, looking up at the nervous face of Hagrid.

"Yeah... it was..."

"...by you." Harry completed.

"What?" Hagrid dropped his cup to the floor. "I never!"

Harry held up his hands. "Hagrid, I know that you didn't open the Chamber of Secrets. However, a student was killed. In order for me to clear your name, I need you to tell me what your 'beast' was."

Hagrid looked down at his hands for a moment, before muttering a single word. "Aragog..."

"Oh..." Harry started to massage his nose in a brilliant display of acting. "Hagrid, please tell me that your cuddly little pet was not Aragog, the King of the Acromantula colony?"

"You know about Aragog?"

"Hagrid..." Harry groaned, "thirty foot spiders do not make good pets. Thirty foot carnivorous spiders don't make good pets." He snorted. "They're also not particularly good at hiding, what with them being, what's the correct term? Bloody massive! Why can't you like kittens, or bunny rabbits, or squirrels?"

"They're boring..." Hagrid replied weakly. "But, yeah, I was keeping Aragog in a box. After that girl was killed, the Head Boy came and took me to the Headmaster. I was expelled and my wand snapped, but Professor Dumbledore got me a job as the Groundskeeper."

Harry nodded. "Okay, then. So, you didn't open the Chamber. Which means we need to reveal who the true murderer was."

"And how you gonna do that?" Hagrid asked. "It happened a long time ago, Harry. There's no proof anymore."

“Let me worry about that, Hagrid, all you-” Fang interrupted Harry with a low howl.

Hagrid shot to his feet, and scurried to the window. “There’s someone comin’!” He turned back to Harry. “Do you have your...” He trailed off as he saw Harry was no longer sitting there.

There was a knock on the door. Hagrid gave one last, quick look around before opening it.

“Good evening, Hagrid.” It was Dumbledore. He entered the cabin, followed by a short, balding grey-haired man, dressed oddly in a pin-striped suit, a cloak and purple shoes.

Harry watched from his place near the far wall, the disillusionment charm allowing him to blend seamlessly into the shadows. Fudge... he thought viciously. You think you’re taking him away... You can fuck right off.

Hagrid had become quite pale at seeing two of the most powerful men in the Wizarding world enter his hut. “Professor Dumbledore? What’s going on?”

Fudge stepped forward, spinning his revolting lime-green bowler hat in his hands. “Bad business, Hagrid... Very bad business. Had to come.”

“What?” Hagrid demanded, making the smaller man flinch.

“All these attacks of Muggleborns, Hagrid. Looks very bad. It’s gone far enough. The Ministry has to act.”

Hagrid looked imploringly at Dumbledore. “Sir, you know I’d never-”

Dumbledore raised a hand, cutting off Hagrid. “Cornelius, I want it known that Hagrid has my full confidence and support.”

“Hagrid’s record is against him, Dumbledore. Ministry’s got to be seen to be doing something.”

Harry fumed silently. Ah, yes... 'got to be seen to be doing something', not actually investigating and doing something. Sometimes, I hate this bloody world...

"If it turns out that it wasn't Hagrid, he'll be sent back here and we'll say no more about it. But I've got to take him."

I love this! Harry mused angrily. 'If it turns out you're innocent, we'll release you, but we won't apologise or admit our mistake'. I swear you're going down, you sanctimonious arsehole!

"Take me'? Take me where?" Hagrid asked, trembling.

"It'll only be for a short stretch. Not a punishment, Hagrid, more a... preventative measure. If we manage to catch someone else, we'll let you out-"

"Not Azkaban?" Hagrid wailed. He looked up at Dumbledore. "Professor-"

He was cut off by another knock on the door. Harry took the momentary disruption to make his move, stepping in between Hagrid and the Minister, and allowed the disillusionment charm to fade. The door was opened to reveal Lucius Malfoy, who strode into Hagrid's hut like he owned the place. His eyes narrowed when he spotted Harry.

"What are you doing here, boy?"

Fudge and Dumbledore span round to see Harry stood in between them and Hagrid. Ignoring the pompous arse, Harry turned to face Hagrid.

"Rubeus Hagrid, I offer you a placement as a Protectorate of House Potter. Do you accept?"

Hagrid stared at Harry for a moment, unsure of what he was being offered. He saw Harry's eyes pleading with him, and the boy was nodding slightly.

"I... I accept."

"Thank you." As soon as Harry finished speaking, a bolt of magic erupted from his chest, slamming into Hagrid. Hagrid, compelled by the magic, kneeled in front of Harry, still towering over the boy.

Harry turned back. "Headmaster Dumbledore. Governor Malfoy. Minister Fudge. How... nice to see you. Why are you bothering one of my friends?"

"You shouldn't be here, Potter." Fudge replied, semi-politely. "Go on back up to the school."

"I say again; why are you here bothering a Protectorate of House Potter?" Harry didn't move.

Fudge cleared his throat. "I'm here to escort Hagrid to Azkaban."

Harry nodded slowly. "I see. Why?"

"These attacks against the Muggleborn students... we need to do something." Fudge started spinning his bowler hat through his fingers again.

"I agree. You certainly do. So, why are you coming here and harassing Hagrid and not actually doing anything?" Harry remained implacable.

"His record speaks against him."

"Ah, I see... well, before I allow you to remove my protectorate from his duties, I'm going to need to ask you for that little thing called... 'evidence'." Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "Where is your proof that Hagrid is responsible for these attacks?"

"Stand aside, boy." Malfoy sneered. "This has nothing to do with you."

Harry looked up casually. "I must disagree. And don't call me 'boy'."

"I will call you 'boy' since that is what you are!" Malfoy snapped. "Do not question your betters!"

"I won't question my betters." He turned to Hagrid. "I apologise if I've offended you, Hagrid." He turned back to Malfoy. "But I'll question you. Why are you here?"

"Leave now!"

"Malfoy, you have no place in these proceedings. You will leave this house immediately, or I'll have no choice but to... expedite your departure."

Malfoy was about to respond, when Dumbledore's voice cut through the tension. "Mr. Malfoy, Lord Potter is correct. This is now a matter between House Potter and the Ministry of Magic, and the Board of Governors has no jurisdiction here."

The blonde turned to Fudge. "Cornelius?"

Fudge looked apologetic, but nodded shakily. "I'm afraid they're right, Lucius. I'll see you later."

With a glare that promised painful retribution and bloody murder, Malfoy spun on his heel and stomped out of the cabin. Harry dismissed the man for the moment, turning back to Fudge. "Now, I'll ask you again, Minister. Where is your evidence that Protectorate Hagrid is responsible for the attacks on the Muggleborn students?"

"Hagrid's record speaks against him." Fudge replied, spinning the hat between his fingers.

"No, it really doesn't." Harry replied coolly. "Hagrid was here fifty years ago, true... but so was Professor Dumbledore. Does that mean that you think he's responsible for the Chamber of Secrets being opened?"

"The Chamber of Secrets is a myth, boy." Fudge replied. "But, Hagrid was responsible for the death of a student fifty years ago. I have to take him in."

Harry shook his head. "No... Hagrid's 'beast' fifty years ago was not the monster. It was an Acromantula, and it currently lives in the Forest. If you don't believe me, we can go and see him, and he'll be able to tell you that it wasn't Hagrid. And don't call me 'boy'!"

"And how do you know this, Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore asked, intrigued by the firm stance Harry was taking, over what was, at best, a minor matter.

Glancing up at his Headmaster, noting the slight amusement, Harry arched his eyebrow angrily. "I investigated, Headmaster. I looked into the records. I looked at the crime scene. There was no evidence that Hagrid was responsible." Of choosing an appropriate pet.

"I must disagree." Fudge said pompously. "It was proven that Hagrid was guilty of letting a monster roam the school, killing a student."

Harry cocked his head at Fudge. "No, it wasn't. It was proven that Hagrid has extremely poor taste in pets," He glanced at Hagrid, who looked down at his hands, "and he was keeping a large spider. But, I know a very simple way of proving that Hagrid is innocent." He turned back. "Hagrid, grab your umbrella."

Obeying Harry without thought, he grabbed the pink umbrella that contained the broken remnants of his wand.

"I want you to swear a magical oath, right here and now, that you did not open the Chamber of Secrets." Harry instructed calmly. "Also, an oath that you do not know what is in the Chamber of Secrets, and that your pet fifty years ago was not responsible for that student's death."

Hagrid took a moment to consider the wording, before raising the umbrella. "I, Rubeus Hagrid, hereby swear on my magic and my life, that I was not the one who opened the Chamber of Secrets in 1944. I also swear that I do not know who opened the Chamber, or what the monster inside was. I swear that the 'beast' I had fifty years ago was Aragog, the now-King of the Acromantula colony in the Forbidden

Forest of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and that he was not responsible for the girl's death. So I swear, so mote it be!"

With a flash of magic that rocked everyone, the oath was sealed. Since Hagrid was still standing there, it was plain that his oath was true, otherwise he would have dropped dead the instant he said 'so mote it be'.

With a smile, Harry turned to Fudge. "There is your evidence, Minister."

"I... that doesn't prove anything, Mr. Potter. Hagrid could be lying." Fudge blustered.

"Cornelius," Dumbledore began in that annoying grandfather-tone, "judging by the fact that Hagrid is still alive, he is not lying. Which means that I simply cannot let you take him to Azkaban."

Fudge stomped his foot on the ground, actually stomped his foot. "Well, then, what do you propose we do?"

How the hell did this guy get to be Minister? Harry asked himself. I doubt he could wipe his arse without detailed instructions... and a payoff from Lucy. "Here's a plan, Minister," he began, "why don't you investigate? Find out what creatures are capable of petrifying people. Then make a list of these creatures, and start searching for them." That should keep the useless git out of my hair while I sort the rest of this mess out.

"Do you have any suggestions?" Fudge asked, all bluster gone at the thought of having to do some actual work.

"No." Since I already know what it is. "However, I'm sure that Hagrid's knowledge of beasties is more than up to the task." Hagrid nodded slowly. "I mean, he knows more about magical creatures than anyone I've ever met."

Fudge turned to Hagrid, a pleading look on his face. "Mr. Hagrid?"

Oh, it's 'Mr. Hagrid' now? When the time comes, you either buckle down and get the job done, or I'll end your arse. Harry thought. "Why not let him think about it for a bit, and he can owl you, Minister?" He asked in a no-nonsense tone. "And why don't we leave him alone now? It's been a stressful evening for all of us."

Without waiting, Harry shoo'd Fudge out of the door, letting it slam into his face. "Oh, I love doing that to him..." He replied quietly, his voice full of smugness and malicious glee.

"Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore asked.

Bugger... forgot about him. Harry turned to the Headmaster. "Sir?"

Expecting another bollocking, Dumbledore did the unexpected and smiled warmly. "That was a very good thing you just did, Harry. I think fifty points to Ravenclaw for loyalty." His smile faded slightly. "However, I must deduct five points from Ravenclaw for being out of school after curfew."

Harry nodded brusquely. "Sir."

"Excellent." Dumbledore turned back to the door. "Hagrid, if you could see fit to escort Mr. Potter to the Entrance Hall when he returns, I would appreciate it." Without another word, the old man was gone.

"Harry?" Hagrid asked. "What did you do?"

Turning back to his first friend in the Wizarding world, an indeed, first friend ever, Harry smiled. "I made you a protectorate of my family, Hagrid. It means that if anyone attacks you, they're attacking the Potter family."

"Does it mean that you own me?" Hagrid asked uncertainly.

"Nope. Protectorate literally means 'one who is protected'. You're not a slave, or a vassal, or property, Hagrid. It was originally designed to take care of young orphan witches so they wouldn't be abused." Read: sold and raped. "However, it's never been overturned. It just

means that you now have the protection of House Potter there, should you ever find yourself in trouble.”

Hagrid tapped Harry on the shoulder, knocking the young man to his knees. “You’re a good kid, Harry.” Hagrid said, his voice thick with emotion. “Thank you.”

Harry just grinned. “Do you really think I could do anything less for you, Hagrid? You’re my first friend. How could I let them drag you to Azkaban?” With a wink, Harry hauled himself to his feet, and headed for the door. “You gonna walk me back?”

Once back at the school, Harry remembered the other reason that Malfoy was present at Hogwarts that evening; the suspension of Headmaster Dumbledore. With a groan, he headed for the old man’s office.

Fortunately, it seemed luck was on Harry’s side this evening, as the gargoyle had been left open. Harry casually sauntered up the stairs, not bothering to knock as he slipped into the office.

“... of Suspension. You’ll find it’s been signed by all twelve governors.” Lucius was saying.

Dumbledore was nodded casually. “If the governors want my removal, I shall, of course, step aside.”

“No.” Harry said, from barely six inches behind Malfoy.

The man started, before reaching for his cane. “Do you have no manners, boy? Get out! This doesn’t concern you.”

Harry arched an eyebrow. “So, I hear that you wish to suspend the Headmaster, Lucy. Is that correct?”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed. “You will address me with respect, boy, before I break you!”

“Pfft.” Harry waved him off. “You couldn’t break wind without the say so of your old master, Lucy.” He said dismissively. “Now, I’ll ask again; did I hear you say that you wished to suspend Dumbledore?”

“It is none of your concern, boy.”

Now Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Do we have to go through this again, Malfoy? Do not call me ‘boy’. You will address me as ‘My Lord’ or ‘Lord Potter’. Are we clear?”

Malfoy wasn’t nearly as dumb as his son. “We are clear.” He turned back to Dumbledore. “You will leave the school immediately, Dumbledore.”

“Funny thing.” Harry said. “As I understand the charter, the Board of Governors are here to maintain certain aspects of the school, but the decision to make staff appointments actually lies with the Headmaster. The only way to have him removed from his post is if the teachers feel that he is no longer acting in the best interests of the school.”

Harry picked up the signed order. “And another thing, Lucy. You’re not nearly as popular as you might think. In fact, I’d be willing to bet good money that if I were to ask the other eleven people on this list if they voluntarily agreed to signing, they would tell us that they only agreed because you threatened to curse their families.”

Dumbledore stood up. “Is this true, Lucius?”

“Of course not!” Malfoy snapped. “The child is obviously delusional.”

“I’m in perfect health, and in full control of all my faculties, Governor.” Harry replied. “However, I am correct. Now, since that piece of paper’s only value is if we run out of toilet roll, I think you’d best tuck your tail between your legs and run away, hadn’t you? Otherwise, I might just let a few skeletons out of the closet for you, Lucius. You’d be surprised at the depth and accuracy of my knowledge.”

“You think to threaten me?” Malfoy asked, incandescent with rage.

“‘Threaten’?” Harry asked with a smirk. “Oh, I don’t threaten, Malfoy. I simply state my intentions. Now, get the hell out of my school, and take your bog roll with you.”

Malfoy snatched the piece of paper before stalking out of the office, his head held high.

“Masterfully played, young Harry.” Dumbledore said as he sat down. “However, he will not take such an action lightly.”

Harry stared at Dumbledore, making him squirm. “Let the mincing bastard bring it on. And I’ve told you about using my first name.” He turned and started for the door.

“Harry?”

He stopped, clenching his fists in anger and turned back to face the Headmaster, who was smiling warmly.

“Thank you.”

With a scowl and a nod, Harry left the office.

Dumbledore pondered the situation after Harry left. Even though he and Harry were again at odds (and this time, he admitted it was his own bloody fault), Harry had stood up and objected to him being removed from the school.

Why? Why would he defend me to Lucius Malfoy? Granted, Harry doesn’t like Death Eaters, and despite his claims of Imperius, he is a Death Eater. Could it be that simple?

With a sigh, he stood, ambling over to the fireplace, throwing in some Floo powder. He quickly summoned three of the Heads of Houses, knowing that Severus would have nothing good to offer to the conversation. They arrived in short order, and Dumbledore could see that both McGonagall and Flitwick were still rather pissed with him, and Pomona Sprout wasn’t looking too happy, either.

"Please, be seated." Dumbledore said, settling himself behind his desk. After everyone was settled and refreshments had been offered, Dumbledore got straight down to business. "I wish to discuss Harry Potter."

"Oh, what now, Albus?" McGonagall snapped. "Haven't you done enough?"

"I agree." Flitwick said firmly. "You've been seeing just how far you can push the lad, and all you've done is push him further and further away from you. I strongly suspect we may be losing Mr. Potter from Hogwarts at this rate."

Sprout just stared at Dumbledore, anger in her eyes. It was as unnerving as being savaged by a duck.

"Y-Yes..." Dumbledore said, tearing his gaze away from Sprout. "Anyway, I have just had a rather interesting meeting with Lucius Malfoy. He came in with a petition to have me removed as Headmaster. However, Mr. Potter came up to my office and prevented Lucius from carrying out his plan. I... I'm at a loss to understand why he'd defend me."

McGonagall sighed. "Did you start taking brain cell killer? Harry Potter is a good young man, Albus. He's about as light as it comes. You constantly pushing him is doing him no favours."

Nodding slowly, Dumbledore cleared his throat. "The young man baffles me."

"In what way?" Flitwick asked. "The only reason I ask is that he's as clear as glass to me."

"He..." Dumbledore floundered for a moment to get the right words. "He drew power from the school to heal Miss Granger. And yet, the school was not damaged in any way. He said that he wants to work with me, and then refused when I suggested that he go into Divination. I have valid reasons for pushing him towards that point of view. He... I don't understand him."

Sprout leaned forward in her chair. "Did you give him the reasons that you want him to go into Divination, or just tell him that he should and expect him to go along with it?"

"The reasons I have are not something to be shared lightly." Dumbledore said haughtily. "Put simply, Harry is not old enough to learn of these reasons."

"That's why." Sprout said with a shrug. "I've only really observed him during Herbology and some of his meals, but he's not exactly a normal child. I've never seen him worry about his homework, and every essay that he's given in to me is nearly-flawless. He's very mature, and I think that's your sticking point."

Dumbledore nodded. "You believe that he is not really a child anymore?"

"Yes." All three House Heads said together, before McGonagall spoke up. "Albus, you've been treating him like he's just another young boy, with no idea of what he wants. You seem to be focussing on him far too much."

Dumbledore sighed. "Despite his apparent maturity, he is just a young boy, not to mention a very high-profile young boy. He'll need help and guidance."

Flitwick stood up on his chair, resting his hands on the edge of Dumbledore's desk. "And why does it need to be your help and guidance, Albus?"

"Excuse me?" Dumbledore was shocked at Flitwick's question. "I am one of the foremost light wizards, and I know what he will need."

"How?" Flitwick pressed ahead. "You asked him about his electives, and then told him that you'd decided differently for him. You didn't tell him why you'd selected differently. You just told him you had, and then expected him to follow. What is this obsession with Harry, Headmaster?"

With a sigh, Dumbledore popped a Lemon Drop into his mouth. "As Harry himself told you at his birthday party last year, Voldemort is not dead. He will return. When he does, he will go after Harry Potter. That is unavoidable."

"For one of these reasons that you think Harry isn't old enough to hear?" McGonagall asked snidely. "Since all of us are considerably older than Mr. Potter, would you care to share them with us?"

"No." Dumbledore replied simply. "You can't understand the burdens that this knowledge carries. I will not pass them on to anyone else. When the time is right, I shall inform Mr. Potter. Until then, I'm afraid that I won't be able to pass on this information."

Flitwick glanced at McGonagall, who nodded slightly. "Then you shall continue to push Mr. Potter further and further away from you, sir." McGonagall said as she stood. "I shall not assist you as you continue to push him. I would think very carefully, Albus." Sprout stood up next to her, with Flitwick jumping off his chair. Without another word, all three stalked out of Dumbledore's office, leaving the old man alone with his thoughts.

No... I know what will need to happen. Harry will have to fight Voldemort, and he will have to die. It's unavoidable. For the Greater Good, Harry Potter must die at Voldemort's hand.

Author's Note: We're rapidly approaching the end of second year. I doubt third year will be as long as the first two years, simply because. I realise that the manipulations of Albus are getting a bit repetitive, but I know that the old man would simply keep trying. Things will perk up for our hero soon.

Another Author's Note: I'm starting a new job on Monday, so my writing may take a little longer to update. I WILL NOT ABANDON THIS STORY. I'll continue to write until I'm no longer able to draw breath.

– CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR –

The Hall is Rented...

It was official: Hermione Granger was confused. True, this had been a fairly common state of affairs ever since she'd met Harry Potter, but she was even more confused now. She sought him out, finding him tinkering in his Portkey box.

"Harry?"

He looked up, spotting his girlfriend stood in the door, nibbling adorably on her bottom lip. Ah, she's so cute when she does that. "Yes?"

"Do you have a minute to talk?" She asked, stepping inside and shutting the door.

Oddly intrigued, Harry gestured to the chairs. "Sure. Won't you take a seat?"

After sitting, Hermione took a moment to organise her thoughts. "I have more questions, Harry."

Of course you do. Harry thought, amused. "Okay."

"How did you know about me being petrified?" She asked.

"Same way I knew about Justin." He replied, looking into her gorgeous chocolate eyes. "I can't really explain it." Without telling you everything... it's too early for that.

She nodded. "Your secrets... are they bad?"

Harry wasn't expecting this question at all. He hesitated for a moment, trying to work out the best way of putting it. "I... they could be taken that way, certainly. Some of my secrets are bad, some are good, some neutral. All necessary, though."

Another nod. "When I learn your secrets... am I gonna hate you?"

He sucked air through his teeth nervously. "I... I don't know. I'd like to think 'no', but I can't say for certain. I believe that you'll understand, but whether or not you'll ever trust me again is certainly open to debate."

"Are you manipulating us?" She asked, her voice becoming a little cooler at Harry's rather frank admission.

Deciding to go for broke, Harry nodded slowly. "I suppose in a way... yes. I'm manipulating you into becoming stronger. Better protected and able to protect. I'm manipulating you into becoming a better witch."

"Why?"

Because I love you. "Because I have no other choice." Harry said honestly. "You must live and be happy. Everything else is secondary."

Realising that he'd basically just admitted he loved her, Hermione leaned back. "When do you think you'll be able to tell us everything?"

"Quite a while yet." Harry said, sighing heavily. "I'm sorry, Hermione. Truly... I understand that it's frustrating as hell, but I don't really see another way of doing things."

"Can't you just tell me and let me decide?"

"I wish I could." Harry said. "I really wish I could."

Hermione nodded. "Do you have a plan?"

I did... not so much anymore. "Only the haziest outlines of one." Harry admitted. "When I first got here I did, but that's gone straight down the crapper now." He sighed. "I know that I can't answer your questions, Hermione. I know that's frustrating, and I'm sorry."

"Have you lied?" Hermione demanded.

“Not to you.” Harry retorted instantly. “To Dumbledore, yes. To Snape, probably. Maybe a little to Malfoy, but the little shite deserves it. I’ve not lied to you or any of the others. I swear on my magic.” He flashed for a moment. “I won’t lie to you. I don’t think I could, even if I wanted to.”

She relaxed slightly. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

Slowly, he shook his head. “I don’t think so. Not at the moment. Just... just being with you is enough.”

Her heart melted at the admission, something that no other twelve year old boy would say. “Thank you, Harry. It’s enough for me, too.”

He shyly took her hand, squeezing gently. “No... thank you.”

Inside a fifty year old book, a malevolent consciousness was quickly becoming agitated. I tire of dealing with this pitiful child... She has told me of the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’... I want him. With luck, I can possess him and gain his body...

Inside the Portkey Box, Harry was typing out a list of things he wanted to accomplish in the upcoming summer. It wasn’t a particularly long list, but the tasks were... daunting, to say the least. Dealing with Kreacher was the simplest task, although it was far from easy. He also had to deal with the shithole that was Grimmauld Place, although it was possible if Kreacher was suitably... retrained, he could take care of the Dirty and Stagnant House of Black.

He also wanted to get to work on the defeat of the Dark Lord, although aspects of that would no doubt prove to be difficult. He didn’t relish the idea of working his way through the country, but it was necessary.

The Foundation also needed to be recreated, although he was looking forward to that task, since it would be useful to him and a good number of the Wizarding world, too. He only hoped that he could get everything working properly.

The Marauders' Map was one of the most important things, as far as Harry was concerned. By decoding the charms and spells used on the map and then incorporating them into his Portkey Box, he'd be able to keep a watch over places like Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, giving him warning in the event of an attack. That warning may only be a few minutes, but he'd been in the middle of far too many fire-fights and he knew that a minute or two, sometimes even seconds, was often the difference between life and death.

He grabbed the Marauders' Map again, staring at it intently. Again, the bloody thing didn't just decode in front of his eyes. I really wish I could contact Moony or Sirius about this damned thing. Oh, that reminds me. Need to send him another package. He'll need some clean robes for when he's on the run. He made the mental note, before taking his wand and poking at the map.

"I solemnly swear I'm up to no good." He said softly. Instead of taking his wand away, as he would normally to use the map, he kept it pressed down, activating the personality matrix. Harry had a mild flashback to when he first got the map off the twins last year, before focussing on the here and now.

"This is the Son of Prongs. I need the help of the Marauders."

This is Mr. Padfoot. How can the spirit of the Marauders help you?

Mr. Moony would like to ask how the brains of the Marauders can be of assistance.

Mr. Prongs welcomes his noble offspring! How can the heart of the Marauders help you, son?

That one made Harry chuckle. "Ah, Dad..."

Mr. Wormtail would like to welcome the proud son of Prongs, and asks how the caution of the Marauders can serve.

"Dying..." Harry muttered as he read Wormtail's message. "Marauders, I need to know how the map you created was made."

Specifically, what charms and enchantments were used in it's construction."

Ah, this sounds like a question for Mr. Moony. Unfortunately, however, this program does not contain the information that you've requested. This program is nothing more than an imprint of the personalities of the four Marauders, circa 1976. For the information you've requested, you will need to contact our organic counterparts. As you are the son of Prongs, may Mr. Moony assume you know who we are?

"I certainly do, Remus Lupin. Unfortunately, I'm a time-traveller, so I can't contact Remus at the present time. Put simply, he doesn't know who I am."

Mr. Moony would like to congratulate the Son of Prongs for such an immense prank. Travelling through time? What kind of spell can do that?

"It wasn't a spell. It was Muggle technology. Obviously, a century more advanced than your time, but it was still just technology. No magic involved."

Mr. Prongs would like to know why you travelled back in time.

Harry sighed softly. "I didn't have much of a choice. When the Blood War was over... there wasn't really anything left. I got a Second Chance... so I made my Quantum Leap."

The map didn't show anything for a moment. When the message came, Harry snorted.

Mr. Wormtail would like to point out this is a remarkably heavy conversation. Perhaps a good prank is in order.

Rolling his eyes, Harry closed the map, leaning back against the console. Guess I'll have to wait until Moony shows up. Shouldn't be too long, anyway. Soon... soon things will happen. Gotta make sure I'm ready.

In the Great Hall, Luna looked at the rest of her friends, her eyes glowing softly. With a softly muttered curse, Hermione leaned closer. "What is it, Luna?" She whispered.

Luna smiled. "Things are going well, Hermione. Shortly, things will be worked out properly. The Chamber of Secrets will be revealed." Her grin widened. "It's gonna be fun."

Several days passed after Luna's prediction, making Hermione even more nervous than normal. Harry seemed to be on the lookout for... something, but she had no idea what it could be. Frankly, it was freaking her out. She'd tried talking to Harry, but found that he was just as tense and nervous as she was. He was little better at hiding it, either, and to their friends, it was becoming more and more noticeable.

While Harry was off in his Portkey box, Hermione called the others together, leading them on a roundabout walk of the Black Lake.

"What's up, Hermione?" Neville asked softly. "You've seemed... unsettled for days. What's wrong?"

Hermione huffed for a moment. "It's Harry, Nev. The last couple days, he's been a bit... off. It's almost like he's waiting for something to happen."

"He is." Luna said, looking into the depths of the lake dreamily. "So far, this is very much like a game of Chess. Harry can't make his move until the Black has made theirs. Until they do... Harry's stuck. And I don't think he responds too well to being stuck."

The group nodded, knowing that Harry wasn't exactly the most patient person in the world. Hell, he wasn't even the most patient person in an empty room. Padma cleared her throat. "Is there anything we can do to help him? Maybe a game of Sock Quidditch or something..."

Blaise nodded. "True. We've not played in a while. Maybe an impromptu game might get him out of his funk."

"I... I don't think so." Hermione said. "He's focussing on this.. situation. I don't doubt he'd play, but he wouldn't really focus on it."

Susan snickered. "So... what's it like to know your boyfriend so well?"

Hermione's mature 'sticking her tongue out' manoeuvre simply made Susan laugh harder. "Leave it, Sue. When he's back to normal, we can all tease each other mercilessly. Until then, let's focus on the important stuff."

Neville nodded. "So, we get him to play a little Sock Quidditch?"

"Yeah..."

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" The happy, booming voice of Lee Jordan sounded in the dungeons. "Welcome to the 'Let's forget the monster that's terrorising our school!' Sock Quidditch match. I'm Lee Jordan and I'm your host. Sitting with me this evening, we have the Masters of Disasters, Hell's Carrots, Fred and George Weasley!"

"Thank you, Lee. It's nice to be here tonight. I think we're all glad that there's something for us to think about than some ancient monster of death."

"Too true. Are you looking forward to a great display of sportsmanship?"

"No... I'm more interested in watching our little brother get battered with the squash balls again. That was quite entertaining."

"Indeed. If the lovely Miss Granger, who's very lovely indeed, would kindly pummel the youngest male Weasley, we'd all appreciate it."

"Speaking of the lovely Miss Granger, he comes the first team of UQL, the Norfolk Enchants. Lead by Captain Coffee, Harry James Potter, the best seeker in the history of the UQL. We'll carefully ignore the fact that he invented it just a year ago."

"And he proudly leads his team out, the first multi-house team, in fact. A Slytherin, four Ravensclaws, a Hufflepuff and a Gryffindor. Which, to

be frank, scares me. A member of the most evil house ever... the Hufflepuffs. Anyone who's had a detention with Professor Sprout will agree with us, I'm sure."

"And who are they facing today? Seriously? Okay, well, I've been told that our little Ronniekins... there's no point in making that gesture, Ron. I like girls. Where was I?"

"Ron's... team."

"Ah, yes. Imaginatively titled 'the Weasley Cannons'... good lord, that's sad, isn't it? 'Weasley Cannons'? Might as well put them at the bottom of the league right now."

"Who's there, anyway? Ron Weasley, Seamus Finnegan, a very unhappy-looking Dean... What's his name again? Oh, right. Dean Thomas, who's having to be dragged out to the pitch by two very unlucky fourth years... who are they again?"

"According to this roster we were handed, we've got Alan Pickles, fourth year Gryff... poor guy, being called 'Pickles'... and... John Thomas? Is this for real? Okay... so, who's playing what? Okay, John Thomas and P-Pickles are playing as beaters, while Ronniekins is in goal. Huh... that should be interesting. Playing as Chasers are Dean Thomas, no relation to the Hampton who's beating, Seamus Finnegan and Mark Twist, a seventh year. Finally, as seeker, we have Lavender Brown, from Gryffindor. Huh... a nice balanced team, here."

"For the Norfolk Enchants, we have the Slytherin Spock in the goal, looking as utterly emotionless as a pot plant. Good to see. As beaters, we have the very lovely Miss Granger... please stop pointing your beater tube at me! We're being nice!"

"Okay, while Fred tries to straighten his nose, I'll advise that we have Hermione Granger and Luna Lovegood as beaters, while the triple-house attack force of Neville Longbottom, Susan Bones and Padma Patil, while Captain Potter will chase after the snitch. Referring today is Professor Flitwick, who, we've been advised, has already taken three calming drafts in preparation for this match.

“And... we’re off! Patil passes that weird Quaffle to Longbottom who... ooh, that looks nasty. Cannons chaser Finnegan just bounced off Longbottom there... get up, Seamus, you wimp! It wasn’t that hard!”

“Professor Flitwick’s called a time-out while they bandage up Finnegan’s knee. No foul awarded... well, that’s not surprising considering that Seamus just threw himself at Neville. Any other teams watching should pay attention to the fact that Seamus bounced off. And Seamus is being given a pain-relief potion. Good lord, what a wuss!”

“And we’re off again! Longbottom’s dribbling the ball down the pitched, dodging neatly round Thomas, another Thomas and Brown who’s just stood there... is she looking for the snitch? What? Oh, she’s admiring the ceiling... well, why not?”

“George?”

“Yes, Lee?”

“She is still conscious, isn’t she?”

“I think so... yep, she’s got her eyes open. Ooh, Longbottom dodges a nasty attack from P-Pickles... it’s hard to take him seriously with that name... And now it’s Longbottom vs. Weasley in goal... and the score is one-nil to the Enchants. Ron, a tip; when the ball comes towards you, you’re supposed to stop it, not flail your arms about.”

“And now Cannons goalie Ron’s throwing the Quaffle to Dean Thomas, who’s looking a bit distasteful at playing this game. Beater Granger just blasted the ball out of Thomas’ hands, where it’s scooped up by Chaser Bones. Ah, the pinball manoeuvre! Yes, the Enchants showed us this move in their very first game, and so far, no-one’s been able to come up with a suitable counter to it. Longbottom to Patil... to Bones... to Patil again... to Bones and... she shoots and scores! Again, our little brother has flubbed up! Makes us all proud to be Weasleys, doesn’t it?”

“Ron, we’re both straight, so that hand gesture is a bit pointless. Seriously, mate, you need to learn to... what’s this? Potter’s making a sprint up the field! Has he spotted the snitch?”

“It’s fairly clear that Brown hasn’t. Is she counting cobwebs or something?”

“I have no idea, Lee. And Bones has launched a shot! And Potter catches the snitch! The Enchants win! Ooh, that looks painful there, Ron. I think a trip to the hospital wing might be in order. You don’t have a lot of look with the UQL, do you? Isn’t that the second time your nose has been broken?”

“And Professor Flitwick awards the game to the Norfolk Enchants, with a stunning 17-0 victory. If we’re honest-”

“And we’re always honest.”

“I think the Weasley Cannons were lucky to get the 0. Still... stop flicking blood, Ron! We told you last time to stop doing that!”

With an eyeroll, Lee clapped his hands. “Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen. That’s everything. I’m Lee Jordan, with Hell’s Carrots, wishing you all a good night!”

Leaving the large dungeon, Harry felt his spirits lifting. Thanks to his friends, and a solid Sock Quidditch victory, he felt better than he had in days. Of course, he should have known that Fate hated him with a fiery passion, and would make him pay for being in a good mood.

As they entered the second floor, Harry’s senses went to Red Alert. Something was wrong here. Something that he didn’t know. He turned to his friends, noticing that each of them was sharing his discomfort. “You feel it?” He asked tersely.

“Yeah...” The other six agreed nervously.

“I think wands out.” Harry said, pulling his own as he looked around. He couldn’t see anything at the moment, but he, more than anyone,

knew of various ways things could be disguised. "There's something here... or there's been something here."

"The Basilisk..." Hermione breathed, drawing her wand and shuffling in her pocket for her communication mirror. Ever since she'd heard about the basilisk, she'd carried the small device around with her. "I'll take point if you want."

Harry nodded tersely, hating putting her in any kind of danger, but knowing that with the mirror, she'd be reasonably safe. "Take care."

With a tender smile, Hermione extended the mirror around the corner of the nearest intersection, spotting nothing. "It's clear."

For almost five minutes, they slowly made their way across the second floor, peering round corners discretely. Harry's senses were as taught as a bow string, but he quickly employed his Occlumency skills to calm his mind and emotions. No point in becoming Hex-happy... yet.

"Anyone see anything?" Susan asked, her hand shaking slightly.

Harry slowly shook his head and took a chance. Closing his eyes, he sent out a pulse of magic, his form of sonar. He could feel it bounce off his friends and their wands, but there was nothing else magical that he could detect. "That's not right..." He muttered.

Hermione looked up, nervous after feeling something passing through her. "Was that that weird detection thing you do?"

"Hmm? Yeah..." Harry replied absently. "The only magical cores in the area are us. There's nothing else. There should be something within range. It's not class or meal time. There should be some people around, but there's nothing."

Hermione was the smartest witch of her generation for a reason. "Another attack? If the basilisk has managed to..."

“Kill?” Harry asked. “It’s certainly a possibility. If they were dead, their souls would depart and their magic would be gone. I’ve never actually tried to scan a petrified person. I don’t know if they’d register.”

Hermione nodded, raising her mirror to look around the corner. What she saw made her stomach roll with nausea. “Harry...”

Slowly closing his eyes, Harry asked the question everyone wanted to know but wasn’t brave enough to ask. “How many?”

It took a moment for the reply to come. “Five... I think.” Hermione said, squinting into her mirror. “Yeah... five people. I can’t tell if they’re alive or dead. We need to go and check them.”

Harry nodded as he stepped out around the corner. He knew that Blink wasn’t still in the area, so it was relatively safe. As he walked forward, he realised that it was time. People were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Damn it... this never happened originally. Is this because of me?

As he got closer, he was able to make out the identity of the fallen students. It appeared to be most of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team, lying prostate on the floor.

Hermione looked up fearfully, staring into Harry’s stormy green eyes. “Harry?”

Before he could answer, another voice spoke in. With glowing white eyes, Luna intoned, “Her skeleton will lie in the chamber forever!” She blinked, her eyes fading before turning to Harry, her face a mask of panic. “Go... go, now!”

Without a further comment, Harry vanished as he ran. Hermione stood to move to him, but was stopped by Luna’s hand. “This is his, Hermione.” She smiled weakly. “He’ll be fine.”

Hermione shook her head. “But... the Heir of Slytherin is Voldemort!”

“I know.” Luna replied calmly. “Harry’s faced him before and won. Have trust and faith in him, Hermione. You cannot assist in this battle. All you can do is be there for him afterwards.”

With a pout, Hermione waved her wand at the intercom speaker on the far wall. “Professor Dumbledore, can you come to the second floor, west side? We have petrified students.”

Harry ran up to the fifth floor, barely breathing hard. He passed into the common room, barely waiting for the portrait to acknowledge him. Once inside, he dashed up the stairs into his dorm room, quickly pressing his hand against the door of his Portkey box. He passed into the console room, ignoring the glittering console as he headed to his bedroom. Inside the wardrobe was a small chest, containing some of his needed battle supplies.

Internally, he was seething over what had happened. It’s never enough, is it? He mused as he pulled off his fragile school shoes. I save people from the basilisk, so others get petrified. It’s true: fate hates my guts.

With a slight shimmy, he dropped his pants to the floor, stepping forward and pulling out a pair of heavily reinforced black jeans. Tight enough to be snug, but not hamper movement.

He pulled out a padded vest, pulling it on top of his school shirt.

“All students are to make their way to their dormitories immediately.” McGonagall’s voice called over the PA system.

With a snarl, Harry raised his wand to his throat. “Sonorous. All teachers, staff, students and ghosts report to the Great Hall immediately. You have five minutes.”

Dumbledore looked up at hearing Harry’s voice reverberating throughout Hogwarts. He withheld a grim smile as he heard a second year student issue a command to the whole school. What made him lose his resolve was seeing students in the halls look at each other, before turning around and heading to the Great Hall. This will be

interesting. Perhaps this needed to happen. I will have to reflect further... after the current crisis is done.

Four minutes, fifty seconds later, the school was assembled in the Great Hall. The teachers were stood in a small group at the staff table.

"I'm really not sure about this." McGonagall muttered, looking round the packed Great Hall. "I wonder why the students listened to Harry Potter instead of me?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "I would guess, Minerva, that at the present time, the students respect him more than the teachers. Even Miss Granger is here."

Indeed, Hermione was sitting at the Ravenclaw table, along with the rest of Harry's friends, positively squirming in her seat. McGonagall glared lightly at Dumbledore, still not having forgiven him for his stupidity and pigheadedness.

Harry grabbed a belt from his combat trunk, lacing it around his waist and beginning to load up items. A small knife, charmed to be ever-sharp, was tucked into a discrete sheath at the back, while a small box of potions were quickly jabbed into a pouch. A vial of freely-given unicorn blood was placed into an imperturbable-charmed pouch, something that would be able to save him from even a mortal wound.

Once dressed and armed, he closed his eyes, his mind reaching out to the ancient castle surrounding him. Arx? You about?

Where else would I be? The soothing voice of Hogwarts mockingly replied to him. How can I help you, my heir?

Is everyone in the Great Hall?

There was silence for a moment, as the great castle scanned itself. The five petrified children are still in the Infirmary, along with the nurse. All else apart from yourself and one other is in the Great Hall. The other is not inside the castle.

Oh, she is. Harry replied, pulling on his boots. Or rather, she's underneath it, in the Chamber of Secrets. Wait a minute... can't you sense the Chamber?

There is something blocking me. Hogwarts replied. There is... a presence, if you will. It is... malicious. Cruel.

Salazar?

No. Salazar was not cruel. He was driven, but not cruel. No, this is far newer. I believe it is a remnant from when Tom was here. He must have somehow interfered with the Chamber.

Probably decided to keep the whole thing for himself. Harry made sure all his buttons, zips and doodahs were fastened; nothing worse than going into battle with your trousers flapping around your ankles, although it'd been a while since that had happened to him. Now, since everyone's where they're supposed to be, I would like to make a request of you.

By your command.

Seal it up, Arx. Seal the Great Hall and the Hospital Wing. Harry sighed as he felt the castle begin to protect herself from the evil within. He could feel the flow of magic change, weakening around non-critical areas while being diverted to protect the true treasures of Hogwarts; the people.

It is done.

In the Great Hall, chaos reigned as the immense doors slammed shut, a series of bars and locks smoothly sliding into place.

"Albus?" McGonagall asked. "What's happening?"

Dumbledore opened his mind, checking on the connection with Hogwarts. "We have been sealed in." He reported after a moment. "Both the Great Hall and the Hospital Wing have been placed on security lockdown." His next words sounded surprised. "I am unable to cancel it."

“Professor Dumbledore?” Hermione asked from the near-end of the Ravenclaw table. “Where’s Harry?”

“I do not know.” Dumbledore replied heavily.

A shrill whistle announced the school’s intercom was being used. “Mr. Potter?”

Harry looked up at the speaker. He waved his wand. “Dumbledore. Can I help you with something?”

“Where are you, Mr. Potter?”

“I’m in my dorm room.”

“Why are you there?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I need to gather up a couple of things before I head out.”

“And where are you ‘heading out’ to?”

Barely managing to restrain from rolling his eyes again, Harry grabbed his thick cloak, swinging it around his shoulders. “Well, my basic plan was for me to go into the Chamber of Secrets and recover the little Weasley.”

“Mr. Potter... no-one knows where the entrance to the Chamber is. Until we are able to locate it, there is nothing we can do.”

“You’re wrong, Headmaster. I do know where it is. I figured it out.”

“And why have you not shared this information?”

“Because now was the right time for me to figure it out.” Okay, a small lie, but hey, needs must as the devil drives... and it’s not strictly a lie... in the original time-line, this was when I figured it out.

“And?”

“Is Moaning Myrtle in the Great Hall?”

There was silence for a moment. “She is.”

“Ask her how she died.”

For almost a minute, Harry heard nothing. Checking to make sure he had all his equipment, he headed for the door, flicking his wand at the speaker, and making the communication school-wide.

“She says she saw a pair of large yellow eyes, and then she died.”

“Right.” Harry nodded, not bothering with the fact that no-one could see him on an audio-only channel. “Hermione already figured out that the creature was a Basilisk; that’s about the only thing that can kill by looking at you. Since I’m a Parselmouth, I can hear the Basilisk while it’s roaming through the school. I’ve been hearing a voice in the walls ever since last Halloween. The damned thing’s been using the pipes to get around.”

Dumbledore was silent as he pondered for a moment. “If that’s the case, why have there been no fatalities? If the gaze is as powerful as you say...”

Harry felt an overwhelming urge to go and bitch-slap Dumbledore for being obtuse. “Because so far, no-one’s seen it directly. Filch’s little demon saw the Basilisk’s reflection in that puddle on the floor. Colin saw it through his camera. I stopped Justin before he could look at it, but he’d no doubt have seen it through Nearly Headless Nick. Nick got the full blast, but being a ghost, he can’t die again. Hermione saw the reflection in a mirror. The last five... I don’t know about them. I’d assume they didn’t look directly at it.”

“And what is your plan?”

“I’m going into the Chamber. Rescue Ginny. Kill the Basilisk, if possible. Come back out.”

“Harry, you simply cannot do this. You must release the lockdown so that the teachers and I can do this. You do not have the training or skills necessary to face a Basilisk.”

“Sorry,” Harry replied dismissively, “I must have missed the part of your CV that listed your ability to speak Parseltongue. Or where you had permission to use my given name.”

“I... I do not have the ability to speak Parseltongue.”

“And yet you’re eager to face the King of Serpents.” Harry left the stairs on the third floor, and headed to the girls’ bathroom. “Sorry, Prof... I’m the only one.”

“Harry, I am serious. You must not attempt this. I have no way of protecting you if something were to happen. You must come to the Great Hall, release the lock down, and let the teachers take it from here.”

Harry resisted the urge to point out that his back was laced with evidence as to the effectiveness of Dumbledore’s ‘protection’. “Headmaster, I’m sure that you mean well... actually, I’m not sure of that at all, but this one’s mine. As the only Parselmouth in this school, I must be the one who goes. The Basilisk will surely attack if there’s anyone else there.” Harry stood outside the entrance to the bathroom.

Reaching into his belt, Harry pulled out the flute that Hagrid had given him for his first Christmas. Raising it to his lips, he began to play a tune. Only six notes long, but the tune had a power, a magic of its own. After a moment, he played the tune again. He heard the sounds of wings flapping, and turned, watching his familiar approach with a grin.

“Mr. Potter? What’s that music?” Dumbledore’s voice called out into the sudden silence.

“Just calling Hedwig, Professor.” Harry replied, leaning to one side as the bird of prey landed heavily on his shoulder. “You ready for this, girl?” Hedwig snuffled loudly. “I know... but it’s gonna be a tough fight. I can feel it.” There was a mournful hoot. “Don’t worry.” He reached

into a pocket, pulling out a small visor. "I'm gonna attach this to your head with a sticking charm. It won't affect your vision, but it will stop all magical sight affecting you."

In the Great Hall, every student listened with apprehension, as the truth of the situation dawned on them. A twelve-year old boy and a three year old owl were going to battle an ancient enemy, unmatched in it's power.

"Headmaster!" Snape hissed. "You can seriously be allowing this brat to dictate to us! He'll get himself killed!"

"Severus." Dumbledore replied warningly. "I do not see that we have a choice in the matter. Hogwarts herself is protecting Mr. Potter."

"No, Hedwig. You look beautiful." Harry's voice echoed around the hall. "In fact, those make you look cool." There was a strange snuffle/snorting sound. "I'm sure everyone else will think you're beautiful, too."

"Mr. Potter." Dumbledore called out. "At least take someone with you! Yourself and an owl will be no match for a thousand-year old Basilisk!"

There was a sharp cry, which made everyone wince. Dumbledore grimaced slightly, as he realised what it was. "I mean no offence to you, Hedwig, but this is madness!"

Several people in the Great Hall wondered just why the old, respected and powerful 'leader of the light' was apologising to a bird.

Another snuffle/snort. "'This is Sparta'? Have you been sneaking Hagrid's mead again?" A righteous snuffle sounded. "It's not important that it was your birthday. No mead." A mournful, but agreeing, snort. "Anyway, both Hed' and I disagree, Headmaster." Harry answered. "But, it's too late now. We're here." There came a long and ugly hissing noise, which modulated slightly. Dumbledore correctly guessed Harry was speaking Parseltongue. "Oh, my god..." Harry's voice sounded weak.

“Mr. Potter?” Dumbledore asked quickly. “Are you okay?”

The sound of retching filled the hall, making several students turn green.

“You would not believe how bad it smells down there...” Harry’s voice was muffled, as though he was covering his nose and mouth. “My god, a millennium of stench... I swear I’m gonna seriously maim whoever’s responsible for this. Hedwig, make sure you grab on tight. This may get a little... rough.”

“Harry!” Hermione cried out loudly. “Wait!”

A pause, before Harry’s voice, softer than before, came back, caressing her ears. “I can’t, Hermione. If I don’t go, Ginny could be killed. I can’t allow that to happen. If I’m not back in two hours...” He trailed off.

“What?” Hermione asked, waiting a moment. “What?”

“Just wait longer.” Harry replied, a grin clearly evident in his tone. “I doubt we’ll be able to communicate while I’m down there.”

“Harry, what about the Box? Can’t you use that?” Neville called up.

Harry chuckled darkly. “Oh, how I wish I could, Nev. Unfortunately, however, the basic rules of Portkeys apply. Since I’ve never taken a Portkey there, nor do I have precise co-ordinates, I can’t be certain the ship would arrive in the right place.” There was a heavy sigh. “I have to go.”

“Harry...” Hermione’s trembling voice called into the intercom.

“The hall is rented... the orchestra engaged... now it’s time to see if we can dance.” Harry said... and the channel closed with a squawk.

Author's Note: My apologies for the LONG delay in posting; I've just started a new job and had a LOT of shit to learn PDQ, and I've only just now managed to get things back on track. On the other hand, this is gonna be a double posting, and I have a few other bits and pieces

to get up. I also have a cunning new plan: first of the month for uploads (assuming I can actually get any time to write... why does real life have to get in the way?)

Another Author's Note: An e-cookie to whoever gets the chapter title/final line

– CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE –

Now it's time to see if we can Dance...

It took Hermione exactly twenty-eight seconds to come up with an alternative. She reached into her robes quickly, searching for... "Aha!" She near-screamed. "Harry Potter!" In her hands, the communication mirror flashed for a moment as the call went through.

After a moment, the mirror flashed. "Well... whaddya know?" Harry's voice came over the mirror. "Guess we can communicate down here. Oh, shit..."

"Harry!" Hermione shouted into the mirror.

"Hang on, Hermione... my god, that's absolutely vile..." There was a moment of pause. "Would you believe me if I told you that there's a huge collection of bones down here? Good god, it's a rodent Ossuary."

Several students looked around. Susan Bones gave off an absent smirk. "It's a word for bone yard. Dates back to the late Middle Ages. Ask us later. Harry?"

"Hey, Suse."

"Harry, do you know where you are?" Susan called out.

There was a pause for a few moments, until Harry answered, "I think... yes... indeed, I'm in a dark room. If I had to hazard a guess, I'm about half a mile under the lake. The ceiling's dripping, and there's algae on it. Stalactites all over the place. Whoa..."

Hermione was pale with fear. "Harry?"

"Oh, yeah... it's a basilisk all right. There's some shed skin here. It's huge." Hedwig snuffled over the mirror. "How do you know that?"

"Know what?" Hermione asked.

“Somehow, and don’t ask me how, Hedwig says this thing’s very old. I’m having a horrible feeling.”

“Slytherin’s personal basilisk.” Blaise muttered with horror. “Harry, if that’s true, this thing may be far too powerful for anyone to deal with. It’s skin could deflect the most powerful spells with ease.”

“Thank you, Blaise.” Harry said neutrally. “I was trying not to think of that.”

There was silence for almost a minute; an eternity in this kind of situation. Finally, Harry spoke again. “Okay, I’m at a circular door... looks to be... is this an airlock?”

“Doubtful.” Hermione said. “Vacuum-sealing wasn’t possible a thousand years ago. The best they could do would be seal with wax.”

“True.” Harry agreed. “But, according to records, the chamber was last opened a mere fifty years ago. Vacuum-sealing was around then. This is different...”

In the antechamber, Harry looked at the door. It was different that the first time round. I knew I shouldn’t have been dicking about with history. With a sigh, he focussed on one of the snakes. §Open!§

The door remained closed. “Okay... that’s curious... who the hell would password protect a door only a Parselmouth could open?” He pondered for a moment. Is this because I took the diary from her? That’d make sense. “Hey, Weasleys?”

He could hear faint sounds of scrabbling, as presumably, the four Weasleys gathered round the mirror. “Hey, Harry.” Two voices said in unison.

“Quick question, Tweedles: what would you sister pick as a password, if she was going to lock something up?” Harry asked.

There was silence for a moment, before Percy’s voice, none of it’s usual bluster in place, replied. “Er... you might want to try your name,

Harry, or your title. She's always been very fond of the story of the 'Boy-Who-Lived'."

Harry sighed. "Fine." §Harry James Potter. Harry Potter. Harry. Potter. James. Pureblood. Boy-Who-Lived. Horcrux. Ginevra. Ginny. Weasley. Voldemort.§ The snakes in the door began to retract. "Arrogant tossers, all of them..."

"Harry?" Hermione's voice came from his pocket. "What's wrong?"

"The password was 'Voldemort'. Whoever came up with that one should get a commendation for original thinking." He replied sarcastically. "Honestly... The door's opening. And, of course! It's dark inside. Hedwig, you see anything?"

She snuffled in his ear.

"No, I can't either... I really don't like this." He sighed again, before stepping forward. §Lights!§ Camera... action... It's like the plot in some really bad story. Once inside the main Chamber, the door slowly began to close behind him. "Okay... that's not creepy at all, is it?"

"You okay down there, Harry?" Hermione asked again.

"Well, the lights have come on." Harry said, trying to make his voice sound cheerful. "But I can still barely see. This place is depressing as hell though... and it smells like a stagnant canal." Harry passed the main entry arch, heading down towards the far end of the Chamber. "This'd be a great place to shoot a horror movie. It's dank, cold, stinks and it's creepy. You couldn't ask for a better set."

"Where's my sister, Potter?" Ron's voice snapped over the mirror. "Concentrate on the important things!"

"I am." Harry muttered under his breath. "I'm concentrating on not crapping myself in terror." He cleared his throat. "Okay... enough of this darkness shit." He flicked his wand, sending out magical light bulbs to float about him, in the corners of the Chamber, and on each

support pillar. The lighting in the Chamber grew until he could see everything.

"Hello, Ginny." Harry said softly. "Okay, I've found Ginny Weasley. She's lying on the ground at the far end of the Chamber. She appears to be either unconscious or asleep. There's a large pool of water just beyond her, and a huge statue just beyond that. Good lord, Slytherin was ugly."

"Don't just stand there!" Ron screamed through the mirror. "Check if she's all right!"

"Give me a minute." Harry replied. "I can't see or hear anyone else. How the hell did she get down here? Where the person that took her? And more to the point, where the bloody hell's the Basilisk?"

"It won't come until it's called." A voice from the far end of the Chamber called out, stepping out from behind one of the pillars.

"Hello." Harry said, a gleam of malice in his voice. "And who are you, and what are you doing in the Chamber of Secrets?"

"I? That's not important." He glanced down at Ginny. "Tis a shame about the girl."

Harry made no attempt to move forward. "She's not dead yet. And you... wait a minute... Slytherin robes, prefect badge, annoying sneer that I've seen before... Oh, I know who you are!"

"Harry?"

"In a minute." Harry replied absently. "It's been a while since I've seen you. Care to tell me how you're standing here?"

"Me? I'm just a memory, preserved in a diary for fifty years." The other boy said.

Harry looked down at Ginny for a moment. "I'm curious... how exactly did Ginny Weasley get like this?"

The stranger smiled evilly. "Well, that's actually a rather fascinating tale. Why don't you come over and sit with me, and I'll share it with you?"

"Probably because I believe you're on a clock." Harry replied. "I think you're trying to distract me. It won't work."

"Fine." The other boy shrugged. "Foolish little Ginny poured her heart and soul into a diary, which contained-

"You." Harry replied, finally taking a step closer. In his ear, Hedwig snuffled. "You're not quite all here yet, though... Hedwig says that you're human, yet you're not."

"If I knew or cared what a Hedwig was, I might be bothered." The other boy replied.

"You still haven't told me your name." Harry pointed out.

"You may call me... Tom."

In the mirror, Harry heard Dumbledore's gasp of shock. He ignored it, for the moment. "Well, good manners should be returned, I suppose, Tom. I'm Harry Potter."

"Yes... I've heard of you, of course. The 'Boy-Who-Lived', I believe they call you." Tom replied, looking even more smug and sure.

"Some call me that." Harry agreed. "However, others call me," §The Destroyer of Voldemort.§

Tom leaned back slightly. "Interesting... but futile."

Harry took a few steps closer, making sure to keep his wand out of sight, just in case the teenage Voldemort decided he'd want to use that instead. "So... you've been controlling Ginny somehow?"

"Oh, yes." Tom replied, entirely too smugly. "It was easy. She started writing in me. Do you have any idea just how deathly dull it is to listen to an eleven year old girl?"

“No.” Harry replied. “The only eleven year old girls I knew were all fascinating.” He grinned. “You must have picked the short straw on that one, Tom.”

The other boy shrugged. “Well, perhaps. Still, I was patient. I was kind. I entertained her little fantasies and dilemmas. Then, she finally got more interesting. She started telling me about the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’. How he was so brave, handsome and powerful. A living legend.”

Harry mock-preened for a moment. “Well... I’d argue with you, but it’s true.”

Tom sniggered. Like any good intellectual, he enjoyed a verbal joust. “As I gained more and more control over her, I was able to influence her.”

“‘Influence her’?” Harry repeated. “By ‘influence her’, I assume you mean possession of some sort.”

“Of course.” Tom said happily. “Even though I was driving, it was Ginny Weasley who killed all the school roosters. It was Ginny Weasley who attacked the Squib’s cat, and petrified all those Muggleborns.” He smirked malevolently. “Of course, she didn’t remember doing this. The diary entries after each attack were delicious.”

“And I’m sure that you enjoyed each one.” Harry pointed out. “Like any truly deranged individual, you only feel joy from another’s pain.”

“True.” Tom agreed amiably.

“I’m curious.” Harry said. “Everything up until now has required Parseltongue. I know that’s not a gift inherent in the Weasley or Prewett lines. How exactly did little Ginny Weasley manage to control a Basilisk?”

"I have the gift." Tom said, looking at Harry intently. "Even though I'm not... myself, I still have control over what I can do. By using Ginny Weasley, I gifted her with some of my abilities."

Harry nodded. "So... it was you that stabbed me in the chest before Christmas."

"It was." Tom replied, smirking again. "I must admit, I was rather upset you didn't die from that. I was hoping..."

"Ah, Tom, Tom, Tom..." Harry said sagely. "My mother died for me, Tom. She gifted me with protection. I will say, it hurt when I was stabbed, but my friends helped me survive."

"'Friends'?" Tom repeated, looking both amused and sickened. "You have 'friends'? You truly are a fool. Friends only get in the way. Friends cannot be trusted. There are only two types of people in the world... the people you can use, and the people who should die."

"You have a sad view of the world, Tom." Harry said. "Let me guess, the next thing you're going to tell me is 'there's no such thing as good and evil. Only power, and those too weak to take it.'"

Tom nodded. "Yes... that is my philosophy."

"Yeah... you're wrong." Harry gave a light shrug, well aware that Hedwig was still on his shoulder. "Evil must be faced, fought, conquered and destroyed."

"A noble goal, Harry Potter." Tom said patronisingly.

"So, you used Ginny to stage the attacks on the first-generation students and Mrs. Norris. Why? What was the point of those attacks?"

"Entertainment." Tom replied nonchalantly. "But then, I grew bored with the child. I switched my attentions to someone far more worthy."

"Oh... me?" Harry asked. "Well, I'm flattered, Tom, really, but I should probably tell you; I don't bat for that team. I prefer girls."

§Foolish boy!§ Tom hissed angrily. “When I heard about what you’d done, I knew I simply had to meet you.”

“Really?” Harry managed to blush on command. “I’m honoured. It’s always nice to meet a fan. I haven’t got a pen on me, but if you’d like, I could probably get you an autograph.”

“I am not a fan!” Tom roared.

“No? Oh... hang on a minute... if you were here all that time ago, that means that it wasn’t Rubeus Hagrid who opened the Chamber of Secrets in 1943, was it?”

“Hagrid? That foolish oaf? He couldn’t use his brains to get out of a paper bag!”

“Oi!” An indignant voice shouted over the mirror.

Tom’s face lit up. “The great oaf’s still here? Oh, how marvellous!”

“Tom Riddle, you evil bastard!” Hagrid’s booming voice roared. “It’s all your fault! You killed Myrtle, and you blamed Aragog! You blamed me!”

“Yes, yes I did.” Tom agreed happily. “And it was so delicious, too. All those people who just fell over to believe me.” He smirked evilly. “It’s unsurprising, really. Me, the poor but noble prefect, an orphan who fought against injustice and intolerance... against a half-breed oaf, who generally set fire to things and got in fights. Is it any wonder that Headmaster Dippet chose to believe me instead of... that? Of course I was believed. By blaming the oaf, I kept myself safe.” He shook his head, clearing the happy memories to one side. “As pleasurable as it is to taunt the oaf, I really must get down to business. And that business is... you.”

Harry just stood still. “Elucidate.”

“For many months now, my new target has been you. How is it the half-breed son of a blood traitor and a Mudblood, with no

extraordinary talent, managed to defeat the greatest wizard in the world?"

"Hey!" Harry interrupted angrily. "I'll have you know I have many extraordinary talents! I can sing, dance and I'm a hell of a snappy dresser!" He smirked at Tom. "You really don't know how I defeated Voldemort? Why should you care?"

"Oh, I care." Tom plucked Ginny's wand from the ground, writing flaming letters in the air.

Harry quietly read them. §Tom Marvolo Riddle... hang on, that's an anagram... Voldemort... Lord Voldemort... I am Lord Voldemort? Utterly pathetic. If you know French, it proves you a coward. §

§I am no coward! § Tom hissed back. §I am the Greatest Sorcerer who ever lived! §

§You're really not. § Harry corrected. §If it's anyone, it's me. I have the powers of Voldemort, and the control and abilities of Dumbledore. You could never hope to defeat me, Thomas. §

"We shall see." Tom said. "Harry Potter... you come to me with a post owl and nothing else? How do you expect to win against the greatest wizard in the world?"

"Just a post owl? Oh, Thomas... What do you think, Hedwig?" Hedwig snuffled indignantly, making Harry crack a smile. "He can't, Hed'. Male anatomy doesn't work that way. You just can't bend it that far back."

His familiar snuffled again. "Well, yeah, he could, but how would he reattach it after he was done?" He looked over at Tom. "Here's an idea, Tommy." §Let's match the powers of Lord Voldemort, coward extraordinaire, against the might of the 'Boy-Who-Lived', hmm? Wanna see just how good I am? §

"Indeed." Tom smirked, turning to the statue of Slytherin. §Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four! §

“He really wasn’t, you know. Everyone knows Helga was by far the best in a brawl.” Harry replied, not moving from his spot. He watched the mouth of the statue open, quickly putting on his own sunglasses, and sticking them in place. “Oh, fuck me...”

“Harry?” Hermione’s voice came through the mirror.

Harry still hadn’t moved. “You would not believe just how big this basilisk is.” He said quietly. “And it’s one ugly motherfucker.”

“Harry!” Hermione said, then realised exactly who she was correcting. “What can we do to help?”

Harry sighed. §Blink the Basilisk! I speak to you in the name of Salazar Slytherin! I order you to stand down! You have been perverted from your role as protection!§

The basilisk stopped, looking over at Harry. §You speak the tongue... you know my name. Identify yourself, little ape-creature.§

§I am Harry James Potter, the last Heir of Godric Gryffindor and Rowena Ravenclaw. I speak on behalf of Hogwarts, the founders four. Stand down.§

§No!§ Tom hissed angrily. §I am the Heir of Slytherin, and you will do my bidding!§

The basilisk looked at Harry. §What is your request, Heir of Gryffindor?§

§Stand down, Blink. You were put here to protect Hogwarts, not to attack her students. I beg of you, harm no-one. I have no wish to hurt you.§

§Attack!§ Tom commanded. §Kill him!§

The basilisk blinked, before sighing. §I must obey the Heir of Slytherin, Heir of Gryffindor. For what I must do... I am sorry.§

“So am I...” Harry whispered. “So am I.” He reached up to the owl perched on his shoulders. “Start the ball, Hedwig.” The owl leapt from his shoulder like an organic cruise missile, racing towards the basilisk, who snapped her jaws as Hedwig flung herself past. While Hedwig was engaged in distraction manoeuvres, Harry drew his wand and the dagger. “Hedwig, left eye, attack pattern omega!”

The owl barked in response. “What do you mean, ‘what’s attack pattern omega?’? Dive, hard.” She answered with a ‘woof’ as she flung herself up to the ceiling, before beginning a spiralling bombing run. While Blink was occupied with Hedwig, Harry enlarged the dagger to twice its normal size, before hurling it with all his might at the basilisk, a banishing charm speeding it up.

Blink shrieked as the dagger smashed right through her right eye, obliterating her all-killing gaze. Harry looked up at the magnificent creature with sadness. §I’m sorry... but I must. I cannot allow you to harm any more in this school. Stand down and live. Fight... and I will kill you.§

§You will fight!§ Tom roared. §You will fight, and you will win, you foolish creature! Kill him!§

Blink roared as Hedwig’s attack finally connected, destroying her left eye. The Basilisk was blinded, a less-than-effective measure, considering both Harry and Hedwig had on protective eyewear. It did, however, give them a little time to come up with a more effective plan than ‘stick the pointy object through the basilisk’s mouth’ while Blink was trying to recover from being rather brutally blinded.

“Hermione, you have any clues for taking out a Basilisk?” Harry asked, as he ducked behind and leaned against a support pillar, Hedwig still swooping round, distracting Blink.

“Not a clue!” Hermione wailed.

“Okay...” Harry pondered for a moment. “We’re about two thousand feet above sea level here, aren’t we?”

“Closer to three thousand.” Hermione replied instantly, tears in her voice. “Why?”

“I was just pondering using a sonic attack.” Harry replied, flinching slightly as Blink roared angrily. “Then again, there’s an excellent chance the ceiling will collapse, and I don’t fancy drowning in this depressing shit hole.” He thought for a moment. “Dumbledore, you there?”

Dumbledore’s clearly worried voice came through. “I’m here, Harry. What do you need?”

“What’s the Ministry policy on using Unforgiveable curses on a Basilisk?”

There wasn’t even a pause. “There isn’t one.” He said instantly. “The Unforgiveable curses are so named when used on human beings. But I would strongly suggest-”

“Later.” Harry replied. He poked his head round the corner, watching Hedwig begin another strafing run, but even her razor-sharp talons weren’t enough to penetrate the tough hide of the Basilisk. “Hedwig, evasive pattern Delta!” He ducked back, before sticking his head out again. “That means get the hell out of there!”

The owl immediately changed directions, heading up to the roof of the cavern, where she flew in random circles, making it near-impossible for the deadly basilisk or Tom to bring her down.

“Okay... enough of this cowering shit.” He reached into his pocket, pulling out the communication mirror. “Hermione, I need to go off-line for a few minutes, okay?”

“Wait, Harry!” Hermione shouted.

“Speak to you soon.” Harry said, cutting off the communication. Once the channel was closed, Harry stepped out from behind the pillar. “As the Heir of Gryffindor, I call upon the blade of my ancestor!” He held up his hand, concentrating a good portion of his magic onto

summoning the sword from the space-time recess inside the Sorting Hat.

The sword appeared in his hand, no longer short and light, but a true bastard sword, long, heavy and extremely deadly. He gave a couple of practice swings, noting that the sword seemed to move exactly how he wanted it to.

§Blink, I implore you... stand down. That is not Tom Marvolo Riddle. It's just a memory. A Horcrux. He doesn't deserve your loyalty or your power.§

Blink roared angrily. §He is the master. I have no choice, Heir of Gryffindor. I do what I must.§

§Please don't make me kill you.§ Harry pleaded. §You are here to protect Hogwarts, not attack her.§

"Pathetic..." Tom sneered. "No will to fight, Potter?"

"No desire to kill, Tom." Harry corrected. "But, just because I don't want to kill her doesn't mean I won't."

§Attack, beast!§ Tom shouted. §Let the world feel the power of the Heir of Slytherin!§

"Fuck it." Harry rolled to his left, sending out a blast of pure magic. It wouldn't do much more than annoy Blink, but it was enough to give him a few moments to get into position. Okay... time to see if we can do something a little different. He drew his wand, pressing it against the pommel of the Sword of Gryffindor, smiling to himself as the sword absorbed his wand.

"Avada Kedavra!" He shouted, infusing the ancient blade with the power of a Killing Curse. He decided to attack the source of the problem, the blasted diary, but a tail strike from Blink made him change his mind. He slammed the far wall of the chamber heavily, slumping to the ground.

Ribs aching, Harry shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs. "Fuck..." He groaned, trying to pull himself to his feet. "That hurt..." He saw Blink thrashing about, reaching up to the ceiling. Hedwig... Throwing a wandless banishing charm at Blink, enough to distract the beast, really, he slowly hauled himself to his feet. Oh, bugger, this hurts...

He extended his left hand, summoning the fallen sword, the spell he'd charged the blade with dissipating when the sword was knocked out of his hand. He took a deep breath, wincing as his battered ribs protested. Okay... thousand year old Terminator, or the cause of the problem first?

Hobbling forward, Harry sent another banishing curse at Blink, knocking her back again. Oh, I hope I don't crush Ginny... too badly, anyway. Another banishing charm... another...

§Fight, you foolish beast!§ Tom hissed furiously, waving impotently at Harry.

Blink roared angrily, slithering back at the next banishing charm, desperately trying to bite the person who was slowly killing her. Her jaws clamped down on... nothing. She inhaled deeply, trying to find her attacker. Harry, seeing the immense mouth closing on him, had dived backwards, aggravating the injury to his ribs. Jesus, I didn't hurt this badly the first time... It's my own bloody fault for being so cocky. He stood up, rolling to one side as Blink's tail flailed about.

"Can't you fight on your own, Tom?" Harry asked, ducking under another tail swipe. "Let's try something a little different, shall we?" Pointing the combined wand/sword at Ginny, he focussed all his power. "Accio Horcrux!"

Tom's eyes widened as he sent his own summoning spell at the diary, prompting it to hover in mid-air, a battle of wills and magic.

"Stop this, Potter!" Tom hissed angrily. "Leave that which you cannot understand!" §Basilisk, destroy Potter now!§

Harry swore as Blink grew closer. "Hedwig, I need you!"

The avian barked angrily as she dived from the ceiling. Snowy owls are not famous for their impressive diving speed, but with the magic infused in Hedwig, she managed a very respectable 136 miles per hour, her talons wrapping round the diary as she swooped past, neatly pulling the book out of each of the summoning charms.

§Blink, stop now!§ Harry hissed. §Please don't make me kill you!§

§I must!§ Blink replied. §I am sorry.§

“So mote it be.” Harry said as he lurched forward, the glowing green blade swooping directly at the Basilisk. He leaped into the air, the magic infusing his legs, somersaulting neatly over Blink's snapping jaws, driving the Sword of Gryffindor straight into the King of Serpent's brain.

She died, instantly. Her body stopped moving, simply slumping down. Harry landed on Blink's back, performing another somersault, landing next to the fresh corpse. He glared at Tom. §You fucking idiot! She didn't have to die!§

“It doesn't matter, Potter.” Tom replied smugly. “Foolish little Ginny will be dead soon, and I shall have my revenge upon you.”

“Yeah, right.” Harry said dismissively. “Hedwig, my dear?” The sword began to glow again as Harry re-infused the blade with another killing curse, his familiar began a strafing run, releasing the diary. The sword flashed, cutting the Horcrux neatly in two. It instantly began to spray blood-coloured ink, the manifestation of Tom bisected in a flash of light. The death of the Horcrux caused a magical backlash that simply washed over Harry, making him take a small step backwards.

Not wanting to discuss the situation with Ginny, he cast a Somnus charm at the girl, keeping her asleep. With a sigh, he slumped against the basilisk. “I'm sorry, Blink...” He said softly. “I'm so sorry.”

Hedwig fluttered down, landing on his shoulder. She snuffled softly. “I know, Hedwig. It was a pointless death.” Another snuffle. “I wish she

had. She'd have lived..." A thought crossed Harry's mind. "Oh, bollocks."

In the Great Hall, Hermione clutched onto her mirror so tightly, her knuckles were white. She'd not tried to call Harry again, since he was clearly in the middle of a fight.

"Potter to Granger." Her mirror spoke.

"Harry?" She shrieked. "Are you okay?"

There was a pause for a moment. "I'm fine. Mission accomplished. The Basilisk's dead. Tom's gone. Ginny's safe and asleep."

A chorus of ragged cheers erupted in the Great Hall. "What about you, Harry?" Hermione asked softly. "Are you okay?"

"I feel like shit." Harry's voice was blunt. "She didn't have to die, Hermione."

"The basilisk?"

"She was doing her job. She was a protector. She had no choice but to follow Tom's orders. It was all... pointless."

"Is Hedwig okay?" Hermione asked. A snuffle answered her. "I'm glad, Hedwig."

She watched as the image in the mirror shifted, revealing Harry's face. He looked old... tired... worn out. "It was pointless." He repeated softly.

Hermione scrutinised the image for a moment. "Harry, what's that behind you?"

"That's... that was Blink." He replied.

"But... it's just a green wall... oh my god!"

"Blink's a bit bigger than you might think." Harry replied dryly. "When I get back topside, do me a favour?"

“Anything, Harry.”

In the mirror, Harry’s eyebrow shot up. “One day, I might hold you to that. But, remind me to build a remote control for the Box. I don’t particularly fancy the climb back out.” Harry looked away for a second. “I wonder... Fawkes!”

There was a sound that could only be described as ripping fabric, before a cheerful burst of phoenix song erupted over the mirror. Hermione quickly looked up, seeing several people in Slytherin green flinching at the sound, while she felt lighter, freer... more alive than ever before. Hmm... that means something, I know it does.

“Fawkes... hate to impose on you, old friend, but any chance of a lift out?” Hermione heard Harry ask.

The phoenix song again filled the air, making Hermione’s heart near-glow with happiness.

“Really? Are you sure?” Harry asked.

“Harry?” Hermione looked into the mirror.

“In a minute.” He replied absently. “Fawkes, I need you to be absolutely certain. If you’re wrong...” Another blast of phoenix song. “But... why?”

Hermione glanced up to see Dumbledore’s jaw hanging open. “Sir?”

“He... he can understand a phoenix.” Dumbledore replied. “It’s... it’s unheard of. Only those truly in tune with magic, and those that are pure of heart can understand the song of a phoenix.”

“But... he speaks to Hedwig all the time.” Hermione pointed out. “They have conversations... she reads books. I didn’t know it was anything special. Just another language.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “No, not at all. It’s extremely rare.”

In the mirror, Hermione heard Harry hiss with pain. "Harry! Are you okay?"

"Fine." Harry replied, his voice weak and trembling. "I might, just might, have busted a couple of ribs fighting the basilisk."

"Any other injuries?" Hermione asked.

"Well..."

"Harry."

"There might have been teeth involved." He replied. "Big bloody fangs, too."

Hermione slumped down. "You've... you've been bitten?"

"Just a little." Harry replied. "Can I just point out that Basilisk venom stings like a bitch?"

Harry yanked his arm down from Blink's mouth, wincing as Fawkes cried his tears onto the wound. Harry pressed the mirror into his pocket for a few moments, muffling the sound. "Please tell me why I needed to be bitten by the bloody thing? Really, I was fine without it."

Fawkes sang for a moment, keeping his eyes just above the wound.

"But, I can already do wandless magic. Why would Basilisk venom help me with that?"

Another blast of song.

"Really? That's why I could do it in the first... oh, of course!" Harry felt like slapping his head. "The Basilisk venom, a highly potent magical substance, acted as a focus, just like your tail feather in my wand, right?" Fawkes nodded. It was a very odd sight to see an immortal firebird nodding at you. "How do you know, anyway? I mean... you're from this time, so how would you-"

Fawkes interrupted with another burst of his lyrical words.

"I didn't know that... are all phoenixes temporally omniscient?" Fawkes nodded again. "So... you exist at all points in the space-time continuum?" Harry pondered for a moment. "Doesn't that get confusing?" He thought for another moment. "That's how you knew to come to me the first time, isn't it? You knew that I'd need help, so you came down."

Again, Fawkes nodded, pulling up his head to reveal a galleon-sized scar on Harry's arm.

"All that bollocks Dumbledore said about loyalty to him calling you down... daft old git." He sighed, standing up. "Any chance of a lift out, old friend?"

Fawkes sang, before lifting himself into the air.

"Hang on. Wanna shrink Blink down before I go. Lot of useful ingredients here..."

It only took a few moments for Harry to reduce the size and weight of the basilisk, although even his most powerful spells would only work for a short time, thanks to the innate magic of the ancient basilisk, but hopefully long enough to put the corpse into the Box under security containment. He slipped the small serpent into a pocket, before ambling over to Ginny, picking up the sleeping girl, before whistling for Hedwig.

Once his familiar was perched on his right shoulder, Fawkes hovered over his left. The Sword of Gryffindor had faded away, waiting to be called upon again. Shit... still need to get my wand out of it. Ah, hell... I'll do it later. "Fawkes!"

With a flash of other-worldly flame, the Chamber of Secrets was once again empty.

Poppy Pomfrey was normally calm, collected, and very rational. When a column of flame began to form in the hospital wing, she was less than her normal self. She stifled a shriek, which slowly turned into a disgusted moan.

“What have you been doing now, Harry?” She asked, recoiling from the stench coming from the young man in front of her.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” Harry said tiredly. He staggered forward, placing the girl in his arms gently onto the bed. “And right now, I’ve got a higher priority... I stink. I really need a shower.”

Poppy nodded unconsciously. “Yes, you do.” She muttered absently, as she rushed over to the girl, flicking her wand in a diagnostic spell.

“Will she be okay?” Harry asked after a moment.

“She’s magically exhausted.” Poppy replied. “She’ll be physically weak for a few days, but it’ll take weeks for her magic to come back. What happened to her?”

Harry just shook his head. “That... is a question I think Dumbledore should answer. I don’t have all the answers, Poppy. I have some, but not all of them.” Like why the hell didn’t Hogwarts wards register someone bringing in a bloody Horcrux? They should have been screaming at Dumbledore for the last nine months.

They have been. A cool, calm and collected voice said in Harry’s mind. Every time the girl used the vile thing, I have notified the Headmaster.

He knew? Harry demanded angrily. How do you notify him?

There is a collection of instruments in the Headmaster’s office. The castle informed him. They monitor the defences of the school. Each time I have detected-

Hang on. Harry interrupted. A collection of shiny silver instruments, sitting on a shelf opposite his desk? Make little puffs of smoke and whirly noises?

Yes.

Son of a bitch... Harry mused. Dumbledore reconfigured them to monitor me while I was away from Hogwarts. They also monitored the wards at Privet Drive. Does this mean that he hasn't been watching over the school wards?

There was a pause while Hogwarts ran her own version of diagnostics. The school wards are as strong as ever. They draw their energy from the excess magic in the air. However, if he has removed the devices that monitor the wards, he would not know.

Harry fumed for a moment, before remembering that he had nearly a ton and a half of snake in his pocket under spells that wouldn't hold for much longer. Can you release the lockdown? Need to put Blink away. The doors to the hospital wing made an odd 'squelch' sound, that Harry could only describe as an 'unsquelch', before he walked through. The sound was like pulling a boot out of a mud patch, but not. All this time... he was so busy watching me, he forgot the hundreds of students who've passed through this school... Jesus, that's negligent as hell!

I am unable to change these instruments. It will be necessary for you to get him to repair them.

I'll do what I can. Harry promised, heading up the stairs to the fifth floor. While he was walking, he pulled the communication mirror from his pocket. "Hermione, are you still there?"

She replied in a heartbeat. "I'm still here, Harry!"

He could hear the tears in her voice. "I'm okay, Hermione. I'm back topside now. Just heading to the box. I need a shower. The lockdown's released. You might wanna tell the Weasleys that their sister's in the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey's tending to her now."

"Are you okay? You said you were... bitten."

"Fawkes fixed me right up, Hermione." Harry stopped outside the portrait to the Ravenclaw common room. "Oh, just open up. You know who I am."

The portrait scowled at him, before swinging outwards.

"Anyway, I'm back in the dorm. I presume the Headmaster would like a word." He quickly headed up the stairs, bypassing the showers and heading straight into his Portkey Box. Hedwig alighted from his shoulder, heading over to the perch that had been set up in Harry's bedroom, and promptly fell asleep. She'd eat and clean herself later, but sleep was becoming a priority.

"That's... putting it mildly, Harry. The Weasleys have just rushed out. Presumably to check on Ginny."

"She'll be okay." Harry said casually, moving to the console and flicking a few buttons. Once the runic changes had been made, he headed to the new storage area, where he dropped Blink off. With a sigh, he headed for his bedroom, flopping onto the bed. After a moment, he pulled off his boots. "Jesus, my feet stink... all that running around in pools of stagnant water... I've probably ruined my boots."

Hermione's voice, when she next spoke, sounded oddly different. "I'm coming up to the dorms now, Harry. I need to make sure you're okay."

With a grin, Harry told her, "Well, I'll probably be in the shower, Hermione... you're welcome to join me."

"Put on some trunks and I will." She offered. "Give me a few moments to transfigure a bathing suit, though."

Harry closed the mirror, transfiguring his boxer shorts into a pair of swim shorts, before heading to the back of the box. He quickly clambered into the shower, grabbing a bar of soap and viciously attacking his feet.

Less than five minutes later, Hermione, clad in a black one-piece swimsuit that looked gorgeous, was looking Harry over for injuries. "You don't seem too bad. What about your ribs?"

Harry shrugged. "I'll tape 'em up later. They don't seem to be broken, thank god." He looked at her. "You know... you look really nice in that suit."

She blushed prettily. "T-Thank you, Harry."

"Don't thank me for telling the truth, Hermione." Harry said softly, as he handed her a bar of soap. "And now, I have an overwhelming urge to wash your hair..." He trailed off. "I don't know why."

Hermione smiled at him, moving to stand in front, and grabbed Harry's bottle of shampoo. "I don't mind..."

Smiling warmly, Harry lathered up his hands before proceeding to turn the smartest witch of her generation into a pile of boneless goo.

After a shower that lasted nearly an hour, Harry helped Hermione to the common room, where she collapsed onto one of the chairs in front of the fire and promptly fell asleep. Harry knew that she was feeling a massive letdown as her adrenaline flushed away, making her tired. The relaxing head massage would have helped, almost forcing her into sleep.

Suppose I'd better go and see what's happening round here. I wonder if everyone's still in the Great Hall. With a sigh, he left the common room.

Once he passed through the doors into the Great Hall, pretty much the whole school began to cheer him. With a snarl, Harry waved the applause away. One of the foolish Hufflepuff fifth years made a mistake; "Speech!"

Harry turned, glaring at the idiot. "Why should I? You all thought I was the Heir of Slytherin, even when I told you I wasn't. I'm still the same person I was last week, when you all thought I was a murderous lunatic. Piss off and leave me alone." He turned slowly, before turning back. "How was that for a speech, numbnuts?"

"Mr. Potter." McGonagall said, striding down from the Head Table. "I'd like a brief word, if possible."

“Epigrammatic.” McGonagall’s eyebrow rose dangerously, so Harry decided to abandon a course of action that was more dangerous than Blink. “Of course, Professor. Here, or in your office?”

McGonagall eyed him warily. “Is there anything you need to say which is classified?”

Harry shrugged. “Not really, ma’am. I went down into the Chamber, passed through the outer areas before entering the main chamber. I saw Ginny lying in a puddle underneath a statue of Slytherin, and there was someone standing over her. We chatted briefly, before he called the basilisk over. We fought. I won. I destroyed the enchanted object that was controlling Ginny before Fawkes brought us back out. Ginny’s now in the hospital wing. Job done.”

McGonagall nodded, a small, private smile on her face. “You kept your word.”

“I always keep my word.” Harry said, mock-offended. “I told you I’d take care of it, and I did.” He winked, feeling the spirit of the Marauders rear up in him. “Anything for you, Minnie.”

With a sigh of exasperation, she shook her head. “Because of what you’ve just done, I’ll allow that... this time.”

“Noted.” Harry said. “So, every time I save the school, I can call you by that hated nickname?”

“I suppose.” McGonagall groused playfully. “But only then. Where is Miss Granger?”

“Asleep in the Ravenclaw common room, ma’am. I’m guessing all that worrying tired her out. I’m sure she’ll be okay.”

“Good. And what of the beast?”

“The basilisk, ma’am? Since I was the one who slew it, I claimed it. Lot of useful ingredients there.”

At that moment, a hated voice spoke up. "As property of the school, Potter, it should be delivered to me."

Harry shook his head. "No, Snivellus. Standard Ministry law is that anyone who slays a creature like this is entitled to the remains."

"It is school property, Potter. As the potions master of Hogwarts, it's my responsibility. You will take me down to the Chamber so I can rend it down."

"No, I won't." Harry said, turning back to McGonagall and ignoring Snape. "Is there anything else, ma'am?"

McGonagall shifted slightly so her back was facing Snape. "One other thing, Mr. Potter; I assume since you're walking around, you're not injured?"

"Not too badly, ma'am. My ribs got a bit hurt, but they'll be fine in a day or two. The bite... well, Fawkes cleared that right up for me. On the plus side, I have yet another funky new scar for the collection."

"Do not ignore me, Potter. You will take me down into the Chamber, or I will see you expelled."

"You are dismissed, Severus." McGonagall said archly. "I am speaking with Lord Potter and your presence is not required."

Snape stalked away, heading back up to the Staff table. "Any bets he's gonna go crying to Dumbledore?" Harry asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Harry, I'm a teacher. I don't get paid enough to throw it away that easily." McGonagall whispered back.

Indeed, based on the wild gesticulating, Snape was indeed crying to Dumbledore about Harry's refusal to deliver an almost priceless source of potions ingredients. Or maybe land a light aircraft. Who knows? After a moment, Dumbledore nodded, stepping down from the staff table.

“Brace yourself.” McGonagall whispered, before straightening up. “Is there something I can help you with, Albus?”

“Not at all, Minerva. I need to speak to Mr. Potter about his recent actions.”

McGonagall arched an eyebrow. “Considering that the last time you spoke properly with Harry, he told you in no uncertain terms to never speak to him again, I think that would be a very short conversation.”

“This is important, Minerva. I need to know what happened down in the Chamber. Harry, if you’d come with me to my office, it shouldn’t take too long.”

Harry didn’t even blink as he carried on looking at McGonagall. “Is there anything else, ma’am?”

“Harry, I said to come to my office. We have things to discuss.” Dumbledore said firmly.

“Albus, Mr. Potter told you that he wouldn’t be dealing with you. He has already reported on the actions that happened in the Chamber of Secrets. I will brief you on that information.”

Dumbledore ignored McGonagall. “Harry, stop being childish. All you are doing is proving that you do not have the maturity to be an adult. An adult would not let petty, childish grievances come in between a working relationship.”

Harry sighed. “Professor McGonagall, we’ll continue our conversation later.” He turned and began walking away.

“Mr. Potter!” Dumbledore snapped angrily.

“Is this concerning my schooling, Headmaster?” Harry asked, not bothering to turn.

“You are perfectly well aware of what this concerns!”

“Which is why I’m ignoring you.” Harry said, stopping at the Ravenclaw table where the rest of his friends were sitting. “You guys wanna go and talk?” His friends quickly stood up and fell into formation around him. They began walking away.

Dumbledore shook his head, looking at McGonagall. “You disappoint me, Minerva.”

McGonagall’s head span so sharply, it was a wonder she didn’t get whiplash. “Oh?” She asked frostily. “And how do I do that, Albus?”

“If the ‘Tom’ down in the Chamber of Secrets is who I believe it was, then Mr. Potter has had his third encounter with Voldemort. Don’t you think it’s curious that he cut off the communication in the Chamber, just as he was speaking?”

McGonagall shook her head. “No. I believe that he was busy fighting for his life, and didn’t really have the time to talk. I know what you’re doing, Albus, and I won’t stand for it. Leave him alone.” McGonagall turned and walked out of the hall, intent on finding Harry so they could finish their conversation.

As Harry passed through the portrait hole into the Ravenclaw common room, he spotted a dazed-looking Hermione sitting in front of the fire. “Harry?”

“Hey, beautiful.” He said, going over to her and pressing a kiss against her forehead. “You okay?”

She nodded slowly. “Yeah... I’m shattered, but I’m okay. Are you?”

“Picture of health and harmony.” Harry replied, smiling slightly. “Wanna go and see something scary?” He held out his hand.

“Would my parents approve?” Hermione asked with a cheeky grin, as she took his hand and hauled herself to her feet.

Harry couldn’t let that kind of comment go. “If size matters, then it’s a very large snake, my dear. I’ll let you read into that statement what you will.”

Behind Harry, the others, turned bright red as various 'trouser snake' comments came to mind. Ignoring their filthy minds, Harry led them to the stairs. Just before his foot touched the first one, the portrait hole opened up again, revealing McGonagall and Flitwick.

"Ah, Harry." Flitwick said cheerily. "We were just coming to speak with you."

"Shall we retire to somewhere there's a little less chance of being overheard?" Harry asked, pointing to the stairs.

Once inside the Portkey box, Harry quickly closed the doors, sealing them. "So, Professors, what would you like to talk about?"

"The basilisk." McGonagall said dryly.

"Ah, yes... let's go and see her, shall we?" Harry led the group of nine towards the newly-created storeroom, opening the door and stepping back. Muttered curses and one soft scream were his responses as people took in the sight of a sixty-three foot snake.

"Good lord..." Flitwick muttered. "You fought that?"

"Yep." Harry replied nonchalantly. "Hard as nails, too."

"Well, this raises the legend of the 'Boy-Who-Lived'..." Susan muttered. "Not only does he defeat a Mountain Troll barehanded, now he slays basilisks. What's next?"

Harry shrugged. "Werewolf? Giant? Vampire? Acromantulas? Inland Revenue Inspector? I dunno. I'm sure something will come along."

"How did you kill it?" McGonagall asked, walking round the front of the snake, looking for injuries.

"Stabbed it." Harry replied, rubbing his arm unconsciously.

"What with?"

“Sword of Gryffindor.”

That comment got everyone's attention. “The... the sword of Gryffindor?” McGonagall breathed. “But... that's been missing for centuries! No-one knows where it is!”

With a shrug, Harry raised his hand, mentally calling the blade. It appeared in a flash of ruby light. Discretely, Harry pulled his wand from the hilt, slipping it back into his robes. “Since I'm of the Gryffindor line, the blade recognises me as the rightful wielder, so it came to me when I needed it.” He held the blade, extending it pommel-first to McGonagall, who took it tentatively.

“Good lord... you could use this?” McGonagall asked as her arm sagged, completely unprepared for the weight of the sword.

“Hey, when you're in danger, you can do almost anything.” Harry replied with another shrug. “Besides, I think because it's mine by right, it helped me to use it. I wasn't really thinking about it at the time.”

Flitwick coughed, bringing attention back to the huge snake. “What'll you do with it?”

Harry ran his hands along the scaly hide. “Well, I was thinking that all this hide could be used to make armour. There's enough here for quite a few suits. Since the basilisk was Slytherin's personal basilisk, that makes it ten centuries old. Should be exceptionally good at blocking spells and curses. All those ingredients, bone, blood, venom... can be used for loads of different potions and rituals. Good stuff. And normally horrifically expensive, too. This cuts that down completely.”

McGonagall nodded. “I understand. And you're correct about Ministry policy regarding the slaying of such a creature. However, I don't believe that Albus or Severus will let this go. Normally, basilisk hide would go for almost a thousand galleons per square foot. The venom for substantially more. Potentially, you have hundreds of thousands of galleons in potions supplies here. I'd make certain that it's secure.”

Harry smirked. "If anyone can penetrate the security on this thing, they've earned it, Professor. I doubt they can, though."

With a nod, McGonagall brought the conversation back to the important issues. "Can you provide any more information about what happened in the chamber, Harry?"

Harry just shrugged. "There's not a lot, Professor. Really. We bickered for a few minutes, slipping into and out of Parseltongue, he called the basilisk, I fought it, killed it by stabbing it with a sword and then destroyed that charmed diary. The corporeal Tom vanished the instant the diary ended. I didn't want to deal with Ginny, so I cast a sleeping spell on her. Fawkes came down and brought me back up to the Hospital Wing. I released the lockdown, and came back to my dorm for a shower, because frankly, I stank. Then I came to see you."

McGonagall nodded. "Very well. As the Deputy Headmistress, I would like to ask a favour of you, Mr. Potter."

"Shoot."

"Would you seal the Chamber of Secrets, so that it can never be entered again?"

"Already planning on it." Harry admitted. "I was gonna put a password on it so even if Hogwarts fell to a Parselmouth, they wouldn't be able to open it."

McGonagall's eyebrow shot up. "Do you believe Hogwarts falling is a possibility?"

Harry shrugged. "No-one knows the future, Professor. Not even seers. It could happen. I'd just do it out of general principle."

"Good enough, Mr. Potter." McGonagall said. "However, I believe that Albus will not settle until he has spoken to you at length."

"Well, he's gonna be very unsettled for quite a while. I have no intention of speaking to him... about anything. Well, I suppose

academics, but all he's gonna do is tell me to take Divination again." His tone reflected his disgust at that thought.

McGonagall shared his distaste. "I understand. He has spoken to both myself and Professor Flitwick about it, stating that you need to be in Divination class and says that he has a valid reason for the request, but he hasn't told us what the reason is."

Harry snorted. "Unsurprising. It's probably something that I should be told, but the old man thinks I'm too young and childish to know. Is it any wonder that I'm not following him like a good little sheep?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Do you know why he wants you in that class?" She asked slyly.

"Yes." Harry admitted.

"Can you tell us?"

"Not yet. Even Dumbledore doesn't know that I know and he if did know that I know, I know he'd be all pissy and try to make sure that I don't know that I know, and I'm fairly certain that statement can get confusing." Harry replied with a grin.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall began, "I am aware that your knowledge seems far more complete than any normal second year, even with your prodigious reading speed. Could you answer some questions?"

"Some, Professor, yes. But not everything. I truly wish I could explain... but I can't yet. It's still too early."

Luna cleared her throat, her eyes lighting up. "We must be patient. The day of truth comes closer, but there are still trials before it arrives."

"Luna..." Hermione looked at the odd little blonde, "do you know any of Harry's secrets?"

"Yes. I know of one." Luna replied, slowly turning her lit-up gaze towards Hermione. "I know the biggest." She could see Hermione

building up for another question. "However, he has not told me any more than he's told you. In fact, he's told me less. But, because of who and what I am, I know."

"Can you share?"

Luna tilted her head as she pondered, Seeing the ramifications of that action. "If I told you now, it would result in the destruction of Wizarding Britain by 1997. Muggle Britain would fall within eight months. Your parents would be tortured for almost three years before being allowed to die. The rest of us would be exterminated as blood-traitors within the first purge."

"O-Oh..." Hermione looked sick. "Do you know when we can be told everything?"

Again, Luna was Seeing. "I believe July 1995 will be the time."

Harry's eyebrow shot up. "Is that definite?"

"Nothing is set in stone, Warrior." Luna replied, her voice falling into the frankly terrifying temporal aspect. "The future is not set. There is no fate but what we make."

With a nod and a sigh, Harry turned back to Hermione. "Well, there you go. At a rough guess, another two years before I can tell you."

Hermione pouted outrageously for a moment, before nodding. He still hadn't lied to them. And now she had a date for when the answers would be forthcoming. So far, Harry had kept his word. She'd wait. For now.

Things quickly settled down for the remainder of the term. The exams came and went, Harry and his friends scoring perfect marks across the board. (Of course, Snivellus tried to accuse them all, even one of his beloved Slytherins, of cheating, but McGonagall quickly put a stop to it.) Two of the Ravenclaw seventh years asked for a quiet word with Professor Lockhart about his book, after a quiet prompt from Harry, and reported that they'd been attacked. A brief investigation by

Professors Sprout, Flitwick and McGonagall revealed a pair of failed memory charms. The truth quickly followed.

Harry had been involved with some pretty serious correspondence over the last week. It had bugged Hermione when all he'd told her was 'it's just clearing up some loose ends'. She accepted it, though, knowing that she'd have more luck getting blood from a stone than information from Harry.

It was only a few days later that she found out what he was doing, when he took her for a walk to see his first ever friend, who'd been fortunate enough to avoid going to Azkaban this time around. They quickly found him outside his hut, a huge pipe in one hand with a large tankard of tea in the other.

"Hagrid." Harry said, stood proud and tall, looking every inch the proud head of an Ancient family.

"Harry?" The huge man asked, lowering his pipe. "Is everything all right?"

Harry nodded slowly. "As your head of house, Hagrid, I have orders for you."

Hagrid cocked his head. "Oh?"

"Yes. On Monday, 5th July, 1993, you will go to the Ministry of Magic, where you will sit your Care of Magical Creatures OWL examination." Harry said, prompting Hagrid to grin.

"I'm a bit past taking exams, Harry."

"No, you're not." Harry said. "And as a protectorate of my family, I must insist."

Hagrid nodded slowly. "O-Okay, Harry. So, Monday the 5th, I've got my OWL?"

"Correct. On Tuesday, 6th July, you have your Care of Magical Creatures NEWT examination."

Hagrid's grin vanished. "Two exams? Harry, I'm not exactly-"

"On Wednesday, 7th July, you have your Care of Magical Creatures Mastery examination." He grinned at Hagrid. "You'll be an expert, Hagrid. You never know when that sort of thing may come in handy. Besides, you know so much about all these strange beasts, you can piss all over your Mastery."

With a confused blink, Hagrid shook his head. "I don't think so, Harry. I can barely string-"

"Hagrid." Harry interrupted kindly. "Stop it. We both know that you're one of the foremost Creatures experts in the country. Good lord, the Minister of Magic himself was consulting with you about the various beasts. You can do this. You will do this. Besides, I hear on the grapevine that Professor Kettleburn's retiring, something about wanting to spend more time with his remaining body parts. At the moment, you are the most qualified person to teach Creatures, but how much better will that be if you have a Mastery in the subject, too?"

Hagrid nodded slowly. "I wonder how you know about that, Harry."

"It'll give you a nice little mental puzzle while you're studying, because I'll never tell." Harry smirked.

"But, you're right... Professor Dumbledore was saying about me taking over... A Mastery would certainly help."

"Excellent." Harry nodded and extended his hand. Hagrid took it carefully, not wanting to crush Harry. "I expect to hear from you when you've passed them. And in the summer, we'll go shopping for a new wand for you."

"O-Okay." Hagrid dropped Harry's hand, then turned and went back into his house, muttering about 'finding that damned quill'.

Harry held out his hand to Hermione, leading her away from Hagrid's hut. "Harry?"

“Hmm?”

“How did you know that Professor Kettleburn’s retiring?”

“I overheard Professor Burbage in the corridor last week.”

Hermione nodded. “So, you’re making Hagrid take exams?”

Harry slowed and looked at her. “I’m making him live up to his potential, Hermione. He has the knowledge to pass his exams. If it hadn’t been for Voldemort, he’d have been doing this for decades. Besides, the money from being a certified Creatures Master is way more than being a Groundskeeper. It’ll let him get wanked even more.”

Rolling her eyes, Hermione nodded. “Fair enough. Anyway, I need to go and see Professor Sprout about the summer homework.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“Do you have any questions about it?”

“Not really.”

“I’ll be fine, Harry.” She reached up and gave him a chaste kiss on the cheek, before scurrying, her face burning, towards the greenhouses.

Harry reached up and pressed his cheek, feeling his own face burn. “Women...” He muttered, shaking his head before carrying on into the school. On the way, he was accosted by tall, dark and smelly.

“Potter! What did the teenage Dark Lord say to you?”

“Piss off, Snape.” Harry tried to push past him, but Snape backhanded him with all of his strength, watching Harry spin away from him. Snape quickly grabbed Harry’s chin, and pointed his wand at him.

“Legilimens!”

Snape found himself floating in the darkness. Harry’s mindscape was corrupted; the starship in front of him had no shields, and was leaking plasma from its nacelles. Snape drifted forward, floating through the open door, seeing bodies lying on the ground. He strode on to what he assumed was the ship’s command centre, and saw a figure in bright pink, leaning over a console, crying heavily. Consoles rained down sparks, the lights were dimmed, and smoke soiled the air.

The main chair turned around, revealing Harry Potter, sat regally, dressed in black.

“Well well, Snivellus. You were told. You were warned what would happen if you tried this again. Computer, restore ship to standard specifications.” A beep echoed throughout the ship’s hull, and the bridge was suddenly pristine. “You know, for someone who’s supposed to be a master at this, you’re pretty shite.” He tapped his chin thoughtfully. “You believe that you should have unfettered access to my thoughts at any time. Everyone’s thoughts, even. Well, let’s see how you like it.”

Snape suddenly flinched as he felt a mental assault completely bypass his Occlumency shields. He felt a stinging pain behind his eyes for a moment, before suddenly, his vision greyed out.

He woke up in the hospital wing, the itchy bed and bright lights doing nothing for his composure. He saw Dumbledore and Potter standing next to his bed, and he sneered.

“Attacking a teacher, Potter? I’ll see you expelled for this.” He looked at Harry, directly in to his eyes, but felt nothing.

“Oh, Professor? I’m afraid that won’t work any more. That stinging pain you felt? That was me placing a barrier inside your brain, powered by your own magic, preventing you from using Occlumency or Legilimency. As of right now, you’re an open book to the Professor here. The barrier can only be unlocked by a Parseltongue password uttered by me and a code phrase from Professor Dumbledore. Neither of us knows the other’s password. If your abilities are needed

for any duties, we'll unlock them. For teaching, though, you'll just have to make sure you're doing your job properly."

"Albus, you can't be serious. Surely you'll not let a student dictate terms."

Dumbledore looked down at the 'reformed' Death Eater sadly. "Severus, I have warned you on several occasions that Mr. Potter is not his father. I asked you, I ordered you, and advised you to avoid Mister Potter. You decided to ignore those warnings. This is entirely your own fault. Your Mind Arts abilities will remain bound until I am convinced that you can be trusted not to abuse them." Albus looked at him with a harsh warning on your face. "If you approach Mister Potter in any way that is not vitally essential to a Hogwarts education, you will find the reprisals I extract will be most dire."

Albus left the Hospital Wing, leaving behind a fuming Snape and a smirking Potter.

"You know the best bit, Snivellus?" Harry asked in a conspiratorial manner. "He thinks that he's working to get back on my good side. He doesn't know that I don't have one. But you... when the time comes, dear friend, I will kill you. Your life will end at my hands. I promise on the blood of my line that you will die, Snivellus Snape." As Potter was walking out, he started singing a song. "You think he's an open book, but you don't know which page to turn to, do you?" Malicious laughter was heard down the corridor, leaving Snape to gnash his teeth in pure rage.

The evening before the last day, Harry entered the Great Hall, vaguely amused and highly offended at seeing a good portion of the school body waiting for him. "Ah, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore called from the Head Table. "The school has gathered because they would like to honour you for your defeat of the basilisk and the saving of the school."

Harry's eyes narrowed instantly as he took in the sheepish looks on the faces of the vast majority of people. "Really." He stated icily. "This is the same group of people that said I was a murdering psychopathic trainee Dark Lord, isn't it?"

Dumbledore frowned. "Yes... but they have come to realise their folly."

Harry just snorted and made his way to the Ravenclaw table, where Hermione and his friends waited.

"Harry?" Dumbledore called out.

"You know not to call me that." Harry said as he climbed onto the bench.

"My apologies, Mr. Potter... but are you not going to accept the gratitude of your friends and peers?"

"Well, my friends never accused me in the first place, and my peers are mindless cretins who, even when I told them the truth, decided to ignore me, so no, I won't be accepting their platitudes. Maybe this incident will prompt them to think about things before making wild accusations, and that even rash, foolish, impulsive actions have lasting consequences." He leaned forward and grabbed a tray of sandwiches.

"But... you have to forgive us!" Ernie McMillan stated woodenly.

"No, I don't. You can work towards redemption, McMillan, but I don't give forgiveness."

Dumbledore's frown increased. This is not good... in order to become the saviour the world needs, he must be meek and humble. This kind of defiance could cost the Wizarding world everything. "Mr. Potter—"

"No." Harry interrupted, not even bothering to look up at the Head table. "I have no desire to go to your office and listen to you lecture me about forgiveness being divine. In case you didn't notice, I'm not divine. And I have no desire to continue this conversation." Harry continued to eat his sandwich, making almost every other student in the Great Hall feel like fifth wheels; they didn't know what to do.

Dumbledore gestured at the benches. "Very well, Harry. I can see you're not yet ready to talk about this like an adult. However, we shall be continuing this conversation in the future, when you're a bit more mature."

Hermione was leaning closer and closer to Harry as the conversation continued, and felt a rush of anger towards the old man for belittling Harry so thoroughly in front of the entire student body. Even more unfortunately, for the sheep of the Wizarding world, every word that came out of Dumbledore's mouth was practically law; by declaring Harry as childish, that image of him would be plastered across the whole of Britain by the time the children got off the train.

"Harry..." She whispered.

"Not a problem." He whispered back, not looking up. "Trust me, I know. It'll get worse before it gets better, Hermione."

She yelped as she felt a hand squeeze her thigh comfortingly.

"Damn... school robes really do ruin things." Harry muttered, a cheeky smirk on his face.

Damn you, Harry Potter... Hermione thought as she plotted her revenge.

– CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX –

In the Pale Moonlight – Second Year

As Harry left the closing feast, he headed back up to the common room, pondering whether to pack up the few possessions that weren't already inside the Portkey box that evening, or wait until the following morning. As he entered the common room, he noticed seven students sitting near the fireplace, six of them looking... uncomfortable, while the last was sulking.

"Ah... Potter." Davies stood up, looking sheepish. "I... We were hoping to speak to you."

"Oh?" Harry, through a ruthless application of self-control, managed to suppress the smirk from forming on his face. It was a close thing, though. "And what could our illustrious Quidditch captain want to say to little old me?"

Hermione, along with the rest of Harry's friends, remembered the conversation they'd had previously, where Harry had told them that if he was kicked off the Quidditch team, that would be it. She nudged Susan, who nodded, before she waved her wand at the stairs to the girls dormitory, summoning some popcorn. Discretely, Blaise, Neville and Padma moved closer, so they could share the tasty treat and, more importantly, the top-notch entertainment that was about to begin.

Davies looked nervous and slightly nauseas. "Well, P-Potter... we wanted to talk to you about Quidditch."

"Did you?" Harry asked, sounding vaguely amused. "How lovely. Unfortunately, though, I'm not on the Quidditch team anymore, so surely this is something you should discuss with them. Don't you remember? The captain said that having someone like me playing would be bad for the team. Scandal, don't you know... So, I'm sorry, but I don't think we have a lot to talk about."

"We do." Davies said. "Remember, back when I took you off the team?"

“Of course.”

“I said as soon as the whole... business with the Chamber of Secrets was over, you’d be back on the team, no questions asked. Well, the business is over, so you’re back playing Seeker.”

“Do you not remember what I said, Davies?”

“What?”

“I said that if you kicked me off the team, that’d be it. You kicked me off. I’m not a player... and I won’t be.”

“I refuse to accept that.” Davies said stubbornly. “We picked you as our Seeker, and you will play as our Seeker, Potter. It’s that simple.”

Harry stood, allowing his power to flare. The flapping of wings announced the arrival of Hedwig, smoothly landing on Harry’s shoulder. She, too, began glaring at Davies.

“Wait...” Sarah Fawcett, the Ravenclaw Keeper, stood up. “Potter... Harry, wait please.”

“We have nothing further to talk about, Sarah.” Harry said smoothly. “I suggest you don’t waste your time.”

“Please, let’s talk about this.” Sarah said, looking a little nervous but determined to discuss it like adults.

Harry glanced at Hermione, a slight smirk on his face, before nodding and sitting back down. “Speak.”

Sarah cleared her throat. “Do you understand why we said that it wouldn’t be a good idea for you to be on the Quidditch team in the first place?” She asked.

“I have a high IQ and an excellent memory.” Harry said dismissively. “Of course I remember. I was told that the scandal of having someone involved in such a nasty business as petrified students and

a Parselmouth-controlled monster would look very bad for the Ravenclaw team, and none of you felt that I could be trusted.”

When put that way, it did sound... damning. Sarah sighed. “We were wrong, Potter. We know that, and we accept it.”

“Yes. You were.” Hermione said viciously, enjoying this uncomfortable encounter.

“I told you, at the time, that if you stopped me playing, it would be permanent. By my choice. You chose to carry on with those actions. And now, it’s coming back to bite you in the arse.”

“Why are we bothering with this?” Cho asked nastily. “He’s clearly too afraid to come back.”

“Think what you will, Chang.” Harry replied. “We both know I’m a better seeker than you. That can be seen in the fact that we were in the lead for the Quidditch Cup after the first game, and we finished third, only managing to beat the Gryffindors! I refuse to come back because you stabbed me in the back with that decision. It’s done.”

Davies cleared his throat. “Potter, you’re being childish, here. It’s all over, and we know now that it wasn’t you that was attacking the school. Next season, you’ll be back at Seeker, and we won’t say anything more about this nasty business, all right?”

“No, Davies.” Harry said. “It’s done. Game over. Now, fuck off and leave me alone.”

Davies’ eyes narrowed. “Or else... what?” Who does this arrogant little kid think he’s dealing with?

Hedwig barked angrily on Harry’s shoulder, making Davies flinch. “Be very careful, Roger.” Harry said softly. “Me and my little lady here just killed an ancient basilisk... what hope do you think you have?”

Deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, Roger led the Quidditch team away, heading for another area of the common room, muttering about how Dumbledore was right about Harry’s immaturity.

“Are you sure about this, Harry?” Hermione asked, leaning closer to him as he flopped onto the couch. “I mean... you like Quidditch.”

“Yeah...” Harry ran his hands through his hair, making both it, and Hermione’s heart rate, spike. “Like I said at Christmas, Hermione; I like Quidditch, but it’s not the be-all and end-all of my life. I wasn’t exactly planning on becoming a Quidditch player at the end of school.”

Padma nodded and grabbed another handful of popcorn. “What are you planning on doing after school? You chose Care, Arithmancy and Ancient Runes as your electives. Logically, you’re looking at something in research, spell-creation or running like buggery from something with more teeth than the Weasley family.”

Harry just shrugged. “I don’t have a clue. To me, those are the only subjects that aren’t a waste of bloody time. I’m sure when I leave Hogwarts, I’ll find something worthwhile to do. Maybe I’ll get married, maybe I’ll travel for a bit.” As soon as he said ‘married’, five pairs of eyes swivelled to Hermione, who blushed but rested her hand on Harry’s.

“Best not to think too far ahead, is it?” She asked. “Still a lot to go before we graduate.”

You have no idea how right you are. Harry thought, turning his hand over and taking hers. So much to do... so little time.

“I don’t get it.” Hermione said.

“Get what?” Harry asked, wincing slightly as his back cracked. He’d pretty much ignored everyone bar his friends for the last day, heading for the train in near-silence. Once onboard, he’d waited until his friends had joined him in his compartment before sealing it up, allowing them relative peace and quiet for the journey home.

“That Chamber entrance in Myrtle’s bathroom. How is it that no-one noticed it before?” She stared at him. “I mean, when they installed the indoor plumbing, how could people not notice a huge great tunnel.”

“Indoor plumbing?” Harry asked. “What indoor plumbing?”

Hermione stared at him incredulously. “You can’t be serious, Harry. Are you telling me that the Wizarding world has always had indoor plumbing?”

Blaise cleared his throat, a hint of a smile on his face. When Hermione looked at him, he shook his head slightly.

“No, I’m not. But the Wizarding world doesn’t use plumbing the way you think. There aren’t pipes for bringing water to each sink. There’s just a conjuration rune on each tap. When the tap’s turned on, it starts conjuring water. Just like in the plughole. There’s another rune, which vanishes the waste water. Same for toilets and showers. Non-magic people didn’t really have showers until the late nineteenth century. Wizards have had them for centuries.”

“So... that’s actually a really good idea.” Hermione said, blinking as she thought about it.

“It’s the same for my Portkey Box. Unless I wanted to install plumbing and a septic tank, and I really didn’t, I had to use standard Wizarding techniques.” Harry leaned back, resting his head against the wall. “Besides, it’s clean and tidy. The water is always at the right temperature. No need to worry about all the embarrassing things that non-magicals need to worry about.”

“Such as?” Padma asked, sounding intrigued.

“Well...” Harry frowned in thought. “I’ll never need to call out Dyno-Rod.”

“What’s ‘Dyno-Rod’?”

Harry grinned evilly. “It’s a non-magical company that specialise in clearing blocked toilets.”

Padma frowned in confusion. “But, how does a toilet...” She trailed off as realisation set in. “That’s disgusting, Harry.”

Hermione chortled. "Yes... yes, it is. But, we all know it happens. At least, it happens in non-magical households, anyway. We've had to call them out four times now. Thanks to my Dad and curry night..."

"Definitely TMI, Hermione." Harry said, wrinkling his nose slightly. "Still, wizards never have the problem of a blocked toilet. Even if you were to completely fill the bowl, it gets vanished when you flush." He quickly and correctly identified Hermione's next question. "As to how Myrtle flooded her bathroom, she blocked the plug holes with loo roll and turned the taps on. Because the plug is blocked, the mess can't be vanished."

"Oh... how did you know I was gonna ask that?"

"Because I know you, my dear." Harry said pompously, grinning at her. "Still... now we know how the Chamber of Secrets managed to stay hidden. I've sealed the entrance to the Chamber with a password. I seriously doubt anyone would be able to guess it."

Hermione nodded, then snuggled closer to him. "What are your plans for the summer, Harry?"

Quickly glancing at his mental checklist, Harry decided to soften the impact of what he'd actually be doing. "Well... I do have a couple of minor chores to get done, but they'll be relatively quick." I hope. "Apart from that, no plans, really. Why?"

"Just wondered." Hermione said. "Will you be around?"

"For you?" Harry asked, looking down at her, his heart beaming emotions through his eyes. "Always."

Padma and Susan both 'aww'd, looking at the couple with undisguised amusement. "You're both so sweet." Susan said softly.

In perfect unison, Harry and Hermione both stuck their tongues out, blowing gentle raspberries at their friends.

“Well, I know that my family has another trip to Italy.” Blaise said. “However, when I spoke to my parents at Christmas, they did tell me to ask you if you’d be interested in meeting with them.”

Harry looked at Blaise for a moment. “Spoken like a Slytherin, Blaise. So, like an iceberg, I’m sure there’s more to that story than I can see.”

“There is. I don’t know if you’re aware, but the Zabini family have been one of the principal suppliers of exotic potions ingredients for almost two hundred years. However, there are certain things that they’re not able to supply. They believe that having the support of an Ancient and Noble house, not to mention the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’ aiding them, would be useful.”

Hermione frowned. “They want to use him?”

Blaise cocked his head slightly. “In a manner of speaking, yes. However, it would not be attempting to manipulate him. It would be a business arrangement. They would get something they wanted, and Harry would be able to get something he wanted.”

“And what do you think about this, Blaise?” Hermione asked. “I don’t want the Zabini family line. I mean you, personally. What do you think Harry should do?”

Taking a moment to think, Blaise steepled his fingers together. “I believe that Harry is wise enough to enter negotiations with my family. They have connections to most of Europe and the Colonies.” He turned to face Harry. “If there is something you require that you can’t get on your own, it’s possible they may be able to do so for you. However, I will caution you; my family is rather... well-known for getting what they want.”

A slow smirk developed on Harry’s face. “Tell me, Blaise; your family travels a lot. Do they pass through other Wizarding communities?”

“Naturally.”

“Would they be able to obtain things for me that might be classed as... ‘questionable’ by the current Ministry of Magic?”

Blaise slowly raised an eyebrow. "That would depend entirely on the 'questionable' nature of these hypothetical articles."

Hermione leaned back slightly, looking into Harry's eyes. "What do you mean, Harry?"

"Well... there are things we'll undoubtedly need for the upcoming war. Things that, if I were to obtain them myself, could lead to questions being asked that I don't want to answer or, even worse, certain meddlesome old goats paying more attention than I'd like. However, certain things I need could be obtained through a potions supply company."

"They could." Blaise said. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well, graphorn thread springs to mind."

Hermione stared at him. "What's graphorn thread?"

It was Padma who answered. "My Dad's told me about this. It's a bit like cotton, except it's unsnappable and virtually indestructible. It's usually used to reinforce duelling robes, since it can be enchanted. It's also pricey as hell."

Harry nodded. "Yes... I could use about... thirty metres of it."

Blaise whistled. "That's expensive, Harry." He thought for a moment. "But it's not undoable."

Harry thought for a moment. "While I'm not opposed to the idea of meeting them, Blaise, I'm a little confused about what they think I can do for them. Until I claim my Wizengamot seat or open up other... opportunities, my powers are limited." He smirked. "Unless they're asking me to smuggle for them."

"I don't believe they are." Blaise said, before admitting a family secret. "The company does have... options in place to import 'questionable items', as I believe you called them. Items that could lead to questions being asked that people don't want to answer."

With a shrug, Harry said, "I'll meet them, Blaise." Harry stood up, reaching into his trouser pockets and pulling out a miniaturised backpack. "This is as good a time as any to hand these out, I suppose." He quickly enlarged the bag, reaching in and pulling out a bundle wrapped in pink cloth. He passed it across to Luna. He distributed the other bundles to his friends, red to Neville, black to Blaise, yellow to Padma, blue to Susan and a smaller, white bundle to Hermione.

"Inside each of these bundles is a communication mirror and headband." He explained. "I'd like each of you to put on the headband for a few moments, then pass them back."

Hermione looked at the headband, then at Harry. "Why?"

"It's... it's a bit like Madam Malkin's measuring tape. It measures you as you are now, but it also correctly predicts what you'll be physically when you stop growing."

"Are you making us clothes?" Susan asked, looking ready to 'squee' appropriately. She'd never admit it, but if Harry ever decided to open a lingerie store, she'd be the first to sign up for the frequent shopper discount.

"In a manner of speaking." Harry replied. "They'll be presents for each of you. I'm hopeful that I can get them to you by the end of the summer."

Hermione shrugged and slipped the headband on. She instantly gasped as a cool, tingling sensation ran up and down her body, culminating in her chest, before it faded away. She reached up, plucking the headband off and looking intently at it. It appeared to be just a plain, white headband. With a shrug, she passed it to Harry, who causally tossed it into his bag.

Susan was looking at hers, before she realised just what Harry had told them. "This'll tell us how big we'll be when we finish growing?"

Looking uncomfortable, Harry nodded.

“Cool!” Susan squeed before putting the headband on. Like Hermione, she gasped as she felt the magic measuring her completely. “Ooh...” She moaned as she pulled the band off. “That tickled like that time you measured me in the library.”

“Yes... well...” Harry leaned forward, plucking the band out of Susan’s hands and tossing it into the bag. Quickly following suit, the rest of Harry’s friends let the headbands work their magic, before passing them over to him to toss away.

“Now, also in that bundle is a communication mirror, like Hermione’s. They’re on a private ‘network’, if you like, so they can only communicate with each other. Hermione’s is a little different, since hers also connects to her parents’ mirrors and the one in my flat. I keep mine with me all the time.”

Neville quickly realised just what a great gift he’d been given. “So... we can communicate with each other, as any time. No Floo powder, no owls...”

“And no monitoring. Exactly. However, since most of us still have owls, we should use them. Wouldn’t want them to feel left out now, would we?”

Hermione looked up. “That reminds me... where’s Hedwig?”

Harry just grinned.

In another compartment further up the train, Ron Weasley sat perfectly still, feeling overwhelmed with fear. It was just him in this compartment... almost. On the seat opposite him, staring with immense yellow eyes, was that Potter bastard’s owl, glaring at him. He’d been in the Great Hall when he’d heard the Chamber battle, and knew that this little bird had fought against a full-grown basilisk... and lived to tell the tale.

And now it was staring at him. Almost... hungry looking. As Hedwig snuffled, Ron flinched, then groaned as his bowels voided themselves. Satisfied with her work, Hedwig flung herself from the

window, content to follow the Express until it pulled into London, where she'd reunite with her wizard.

As the train pulled into King's Cross, Harry miniaturised the bag, tucking it back into his pocket. He stood, holding out his hand in a gentlemanly fashion to help Hermione to her feet. Predictably, there were more 'aww' noises from the other girls, which were soundly ignored. He led them to the platform, glancing round for their family members.

As at Christmas, he felt a pang of longing when he saw Hermione rush into her parents' arms, Susan into her aunt's arms and Padma into a combined mother/father/Parvati hug. Neville gave him a watery smile as he made his way over to his Gran, tentatively reaching out for a hug of his own. He understood.

I truly have no family... He thought softly. For the moment, anyway... I have my friends, but there isn't anyone I can be a kid around. For just a fraction of a second, Harry released his emotions, allowing a surge of white-hot rage to fill him. Voldemort... it's all his fault! That moment caused half of the light-bulbs on the Muggle side of Platform 9¾ to explode violently. Shit... He grouched, wiggling his finger slightly to repair them.

Hermione glanced over, seeing Harry staring at the family reunions with longing on his face. Her heart went out to him as she made her way back over, not saying anything, but just grabbing him in the tightest 'Hermi-hug' she could.

Susan saw what was happening and pulled Amelia over, both women quickly joining the impromptu pile-on. Emma Granger saw her daughter wrap her sort-of boyfriend into a hug, and could tell that he was feeling lonely. When the light bulbs had exploded, she remembered that it was similar to the accidental magic Hermione had performed when she was younger and feeling intense emotion, and knew that the poor boy had come close to losing control. She quickly joined her daughter and Amelia in trying to provide some maternal support.

Abhijat Patil was a proud man, a man who belonged to a pureblood wizard line that could be traced back almost six millennia in his native India. He, unlike most British purebloods, prized his traditional values, but was not averse to embracing something new, if it would benefit him or his family. When he saw one of his daughters dash away and join a group hug, he was understandably curious.

"What's going on?" He asked his wife.

Durga Patil shared her husband's values and ethics, making them a perfect match for each other. Like her husband, she didn't know, so she asked the one person left who'd know. "Parvati?"

"That's Harry Potter." The Gryffindor replied, sounding a little bored.

"Ah." Durga understood. The Wizarding world's most famous orphan, and a family reunion moment. "Have you spoken to him?"

Parvati shook her head. "He's more like Padma, a nerd. We don't have anything in common. He seems a bit childish, though."

"How so?" Abhijat asked.

"Well... this year at school, everyone thought he was opening the Chamber of Secrets and letting a monster loose. Just a couple days ago, we found out that it wasn't him, but someone being possessed by some weird enchanted object, after he killed the monster. The school tried to apologise to him, but he just blew it off. Wouldn't accept it. He was being dead childish. Even Headmaster Dumbledore said so, in front of the entire school."

"I see." Durga gave her husband a tiny glance, prompting him to nod slightly; both seemed to agree that belittling a child in front of his peers was very counterproductive. "Well, Padma doesn't seem to think that he's childish."

"Pfft." Parvati sniffed disdainfully. "Padma wouldn't notice if Gwenog Jones came up to her and offered an autograph. She's far too involved with her silly books."

With a raised eyebrow, Durga nodded. "Well, then... I believe we should arrange with Padma to meet this 'childish' young man. If he saved the school..."

"No." Parvati said, looking up at her mother. "He's a Parselmouth, Mother. Everyone knows they're Dark. We don't want the scandal."

"That will be up to your mother and me." Abhijat said firmly. "Have you collected your trunk yet?"

Parvati shook her head, then sighed dramatically as her father pointed to the baggage car, stomping over to collect her trunk. Honestly, parents know nothing!

Durga smiled. "You believe he can help us, husband?"

Abhijat shook his head. "I believe we can help him, wife. He's made Padma more alive than ever, despite Parvati's claims of childishness. Besides, I'm oddly intrigued. A 'monster'?"

Harry was beginning to have problems breathing after the mass pile-on, but he wouldn't be the first to break it... unless he passed out. That'd definitely put a crimp in things.

Hermione could feel other people crowding round, but she ignored them. Although Harry was by far the most mature twelve year old she knew (even more mature than herself!), there were times she could see a normal boy in there. Halloween sprang to mind, when he was quiet and subdued, and the same at Christmas, when he saw the families having small reunions. He was a good young man who'd had shit dropped on him from a great height.

"You okay?" She whispered into his ear, feeling him nod against her shoulder. "Okay, can we step back a bit?" Hermione called loudly, feeling the mass of bodies begin to pull back.

Harry looked up, seeing his friends and their female family members surrounding him. Emma was first, waiting until her daughter was out of the way before she offered her own maternal hug. "If you need us,

Harry, we're there for you." She offered, ruffling his hair softly. "Call on us."

"I... will." Harry said, swallowing noisily. "Thank you, Emma."

"My pleasure." She said, pressing a kiss to his forehead as she stepped back.

Susan flung herself forward, her chest pressing up against him. She grinned as she felt him blush and try and move back. Fortunately, all of Harry's female friends were well aware of where his heart lay, and it wasn't with a large-chested redhead. "We all have those mirrors now, Harry." She said into his neck. "If you need us, we'll come running."

"Thanks, Sue." Harry replied, gently placing his hands on her shoulders, the only safe place he could think of. "I appreciate that."

"No problem." Susan replied as she pulled back, pressing a kiss to the tip of his nose.

Amelia stepped forward, placing an arm round her niece's shoulders. "I've heard from Susan that you stopped the attacks, Lord Potter."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And it was a basilisk?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Remarkable... when you have time, would you be able to share the story with me?"

"Of course, ma'am. Although, Susan was listening in to pretty much the whole thing."

"We must be going, Lord Potter, although I'm sure Susan will be in touch soon." Amelia extended her hand, watching Harry slowly reach out and take it. "Take care of yourself, my lord."

“Ma’am.” Harry said, grinning impishly at her. The two redheads left, leaving Padma to come up to him.

“You okay now, Harry?”

Harry nodded slowly. “Yeah... it’s just... whenever I see these reunions, I’m reminded that I’ll never have that. It’s... surprisingly painful sometimes.”

Padma slowly raised an eyebrow. Harry rarely, if ever, communicated his feelings like this. At least, to no-one but Hermione. “One day, Harry, you’ll be seeing your own family off from here. And you may not have your Mum and Dad, but you’ve got us.” She smiled shyly.

Harry pulled her into a hug, feeling her squeak before relaxing into it. Unlike her sister, Padma was more reserved. “Thanks, Pad.”

“No problem.” Padma, like Susan, kissed the tip of Harry’s nose before stepping back. “I think I can get my parents to extend an invite to dinner sometime, Harry. Would you be interested?”

“Er... sure?” Harry shrugged slightly. “They’d be aware that it wouldn’t... er...”

Padma began giggling. “No, Harry, they’d know it wouldn’t be a date. Like the Zabinis, they have extensive business connections that may benefit us in the upcoming war.”

With a glance at Hermione, he nodded. “Shouldn’t be a problem. Would I be able to bring a date?”

Padma didn’t even need to look. “They would probably expect you to bring Hermione, Harry. I’ll be in touch?” With that, she headed back to her parents, leaving Harry with Hermione and Emma.

“You have any plans for tonight, Harry?” Emma asked.

“Well... I was planning on speaking to the Blaise’s parents before they do, but other than that, it’s me, whatever I can be bothered cooking and a huge pile of washing.”

Emma wrinkled her nose. "Why not come and stay with us for a while?"

"Er..." Harry hesitated for a moment. "I'd like that, but there are some things I need to do this summer, Emma. Some of them are... uh... quite off the beaten track."

Hermione was the smartest witch of her generation for a reason. "That means he's got more of his secret stuff to do, Mum." She glanced pleadingly at Harry. "You can stay for some of it, can't you?"

"Of course." Harry said, taking her hand. "Just let me go and speak to the Zabinis, and then I'm all yours." He pressed a kiss to the palm of her hand before walking away.

Emma glanced at her daughter, who was staring at her palm and blushing furiously. "Hmm..." Hermione looked up at her mother. "I think that we should have a talk, honey, when Harry's not around."

With a groan, Hermione realised exactly what 'talk' she'd be having. Again.

Harry stepped through the throngs of people, saying goodbye to the Weasley twins as they made their way towards their parents. Harry had no desire to be molested by one of Molly's hugs, since his ribs were still quite sore. It was worth the pain from Hermione, but not from someone he'd barely spoken to. After promising to write, (and making a mental note to create another mirror and pass it on), he saw the Zabinis waiting patiently near the coffee shop.

A small switch flicked in Harry's head, turning him from 'Harry' to 'Lord Potter, head of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter'. He straightened up, near-marching up to his friend's parents.

"Mr. Zabini. Mrs. Zabini." He said, extending his hand to the patriarch. "It's an honour to meet you."

Michael Zabini looked at the child in front of him, deciding to wait until he'd spoken to him before coming to a conclusion. "Lord Potter, the

honour is mine, I assure you.” He took the hand, pumping twice before allowing it to drop. “May I introduce my wife, Alexandra?”

Harry took her extended hand, gently turning it over and kissing the back of her knuckles. “Charmed, ma’am.”

Alexandra smiled gently. “You appear well-trained, Lord Potter.”

“Has Blaise been telling tales?” Harry asked, discretely winking at his friend.

“Not at all. He simply said that you were very good.” Michael said. “Did he pass along our request to you?”

“He did, sir.” Harry replied politely. “I’d be honoured to accept an invitation from yourselves.”

“There’s no need to call me ‘sir’, Lord Potter.” Michael replied.

“Forgive me, sir, but it’s part of the way I was raised.” He nodded once to the elder man, telling him that he’d continue to be polite and formal.

“I understand, my Lord, but there’s really no need.”

“My apologies again, sir.”

“Well done, my Lord. You play the game well.” Michael laughed. “Still, I believe we can dispense with the game, Lord Potter.”

“Thank you. And please, call me ‘Harry’. I detest all the ‘Lord’ bollocks.”

“Very well, Harry. I’d prefer you use my name as well.”

“Of course, Michael.” He took a quick glance at Blaise, who shot him a discrete thumbs-up. “Well, I’ve given Blaise a communications device, so I’ll be able to liaise with him when a convenient time would be.”

"Of course, Harry." Michael replied. "We await your message. I believe this could be... profitable for both of us."

"I certainly hope so." Harry replied noncommittally. "Well, I can hear my transport arriving, so I must take my leave. Sir. Ma'am. Blaise."

"Speak to you soon, Harry." Blaise replied, extending his arm to his mother, who took it gently.

"Good fortune, Lord Potter." Alexandra replied before allowing her son to lead her away, Michael following them after nodding respectfully at Harry.

As he turned, he could see his Portkey box beginning to materialise on the far end of the platform. Damn... I just love how accurate that is. He quickly made his way back to the Grangers, spotting Dan waiting with his wife and daughter.

"Hey, Dan." Harry said politely. "How're you?"

"Much better now my wife's stopped me sleeping on the couch." Dan replied, extending his hand. "I trust you've recovered from our conversation at Christmas?"

Harry shuddered lightly. "For the most part, sir, yes. Still have occasional flashbacks, though."

"Daniel." Emma said sharply, raising an eyebrow in an obviously familiar gesture.

"I just wanted to apologise to you, Harry."

"Don't worry about it, Dan." Harry said, waving the comment away. "I know you mean well. Although it was scary as hell, it was oddly... comforting."

"Oh?"

“Well... it was a father/son chat. I've never had one of those before.” Harry replied shyly, feeling Hermione's hand slip into his own. “So... thank you.”

Dan felt a lump form in his throat. “You're welcome, Harry. It was almost worth six months on the couch.”

Hermione smirked. “Please... I'll bet you were back in Mum's bed within a week.”

“Two weeks, actually.” Emma chimed up. “But, not the point. So, Harry, will you be coming to stay with us?”

“Yes, ma'am.” Harry said. “There's just something I have to do tonight. Would it be okay if I came to stay tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

“Harry,” Hermione moved a little closer, “do you need help with what you're gonna be doing tonight?”

Harry sighed. Hell, yes. He thought, but shook his head. “Shouldn't, really. I'm hoping it'll be a simple visit.”

“Potter-Murphy Law?” She asked, remembering a conversation from a year ago. After all, ‘whatever can go wrong, will go wrong, with as disastrous result as possible, in the most explosive and embarrassing way.’ was certainly a part of Harry's life.

“Lord, I hope not.”

After helping carry Hermione's trunk to the Grangers' car, Harry headed back to the box, setting the co-ordinates and dematerialising. It would only take a few minutes for him to arrive at his destination, and he had no desire to simply rush in like a brainless Gryffindor; that could turn costly, very quickly. What he was planning on facing was going to be almost as tough as the fight he'd been in just recently... and potentially, just as messy.

He stared at the central column on the console, the wheezing/groaning sound of the gyroscope oddly comforting to him. Just a minute later, he heard the sound of the gyroscope change and the floor trembled as the ship materialised.

His hand hovered over the door control. I'm not ready for this yet... even after all these years, I'm not ready to come back here... I'm so sorry... He moved his hand back, heading over to the laptop and putting in a new set of co-ordinates. Another control sent the ship hurtling back into the vortex.

The ship rematerialised outside Hermione's house, prompting the brunette to come dashing into the kitchen, peering through the window into the back garden. As soon as he opened the door, she came rushing over, checking him for injuries. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Harry assured her, closing the door behind him. "I couldn't go through with it tonight."

"Oh... can you tell me anything?"

It wouldn't make any sense without giving you entirely too much back-story. Harry thought to himself. "It's okay, Hermione. It's just... difficult."

"Okay." She began tugging on his arm gently. "Come on. We're just about to sit down to dinner. You're welcome to join us."

He followed her inside, knowing that there was a spot for him here... always.

After enjoying dinner, Harry sprawled next to Hermione on the Grangers' large couch, each of them relishing the aftermath of a fine meal. Harry could feel his eyes drifting closed... before a loud 'knock' on the door woke him up again. Bollocks...

Dan grunted as he hauled himself up, ambling into the hallway. A few moments later he came back, a person Harry really didn't want to see following him into the room.

“Harry, Hermione, Professor Dumbledore wanted to speak to you both.” Dan said emotionlessly.

“Joy...” Harry groused near-silently. He didn't bother getting up and even looking up. There was nothing Dumbledore could say or do at this precise moment in time that Harry wanted to see or hear.

The elderly Headmaster walked into the living room, his eyes lighting up when he spotted Harry. “Ah, excellent, my boy. I'm glad you decided to meet with me!”

“I didn't.” Harry drawled. “You ambushed me during the summer. What do you want?”

Dumbledore helped himself to a chair, conjuring himself a cup of tea and some biscuits. “I wanted to carry on our conversation from Hogwarts. You left abruptly, even after I asked several times to speak to you.”

“That's because I didn't see a need to carry on the conversation.” Harry replied in a monotone. “And you then had the nerve to tell all the students that I was immature and childish. Not to mention you've been a royal arse recently. So, with all due respect, sir, leave me alone.”

Dumbledore just waved the comment away. “We have things to discuss, Harry. Important things. Miss Granger, would you excuse us?”

“No.” Hermione replied, folding her arms across her chest.

“Excuse me?” Dumbledore asked, taken aback.

“I said ‘no’.” Hermione enunciated clearly, not bothering to look meek or pliant. “You've come into my house without permission, and begun berating my guest, even though he's told you that he doesn't want to speak to you. And now, you're bossing me about in my own home.”

“Miss Granger, this is important, but not for your ears. I don't believe we shall be more than an hour or two.”

“No.” Harry cleared his throat. “Let me be perfectly clear, Dumbledore; I don’t want to speak to you. I don’t want to discuss what happened in the Chamber of Secrets, I don’t want to give you the remains of the basilisk and I absolutely refuse to go into Divination next term. I also don’t want to discuss turning the other cheek and forgiving all the sheep of the Wizarding world.”

“My boy, you know that I...” Dumbledore trailed off as a pained expression came over his face.

“That pain” Harry said, smirking, “is the Unbreakable Vow, once again, reminding you that you’re overstepping the boundaries that you agreed to last year. As this is Miss Granger’s home, and she has asked you to leave, please feel free to let me show you the door.”

“H-Harry...”

“I told you not to call me that.” Harry said, standing, taking two steps forward and grabbing Dumbledore’s arm, pulling the meddlesome old man to his feet. “Now, get out, before I say something I’ll probably not regret.

Dumbledore allowed himself to be led to the door. “This isn’t over, Mr. Potter. We have things that we’ll need to discuss. Your continued immaturity will only hamper our discussions. You need to learn to forgive others, to ignore what people say about you in anger, and to work with me towards the Greater Good.”

“And you need to learn that you don’t always know everything.” Harry said, still pulling the old man to the door. “And that you really aren’t welcome here.”

“I’ve been alive for a great many years, Mr. Potter.” Dumbledore waved his wand, opening the door. “There are things I have learned that you will need to know. If you refuse to work with me, how will you be able to learn what you need?”

"I'll find a way." Harry said, pushing the dozy man out of the door. "Do not call on me again." He slammed the door, turning to find the elder Grangers stood in the doorway. "Sorry."

"Not your fault, Harry." Emma said, rubbing her hands on a towel. "Would you care to explain why he's after you so much?"

"I can't yet." Harry replied bluntly. "It'll take time, Emma. I wish I could share... but I can't. Too much depends on it."

Dan cleared his throat. "Will he come back?"

"Absolutely." Harry said. "I think it'd be appropriate to layer some defences around your house. Nothing too serious... for the moment."

"Where would we get these defences?" Emma asked, before turning to her husband. "Didn't Hermione say something about the goblins? They offer wards, I think she called them."

"They do. But, I can do them, too. Since I'm emancipated, I can layer the wards around the home." Harry drew his wand. "I can do them now, if you want."

"Will it be necessary tonight?"

Harry slowly shook his head. "I don't think so... I can get up early and do them tomorrow, if that's alright."

"Fine by us."

Harry had gone to bed, spending his first night at the Granger home in this timeline, and for the first time in just over a century. Like other portions of the UK, the Grangers' neighbourhood had been obliterated during the Blood War.

When he awoke the following morning, he quickly took a shower, charming the cold water pipe to always emit water at 60°C, so they'd never run out of hot water. He dressed and headed outside, quickly tracing his way around the perimeter of the house, creating an anti-apparition barrier that covered the block and got more concentrated

the closer you got to the house. He also created a series of layered detection wards, the furthest one being a simple magical detection ward, while the closer two detected Death Eaters and wizards with hostile intentions. The fourth ward was designed to detect any offensive magic.

Hermione came out as she felt the magic settling over her home. She watched as Harry's wand flicked, swished and prodded as more and more wards were placed. Almost a quarter hour later, Harry was finished.

"What did you place?" She asked. "Oh, and 'good morning'."

"Morning, Hermione." Harry said, smiling as he saw her. "I love how you're so comfortable with me you can come outside in your dressing gown, with Garfield slippers, and not notice."

Hermione yelped and ran back inside, dashing up the stairs.

"Wonder why Crooks hasn't savaged those slippers? Always best to eliminate the competition..." Harry muttered as he carried on warding.

Once suitably dressed, and waking up her parents, Hermione tracked Harry down, finding him in the kitchen, cooking up a storm. "So, now that I'm not quite as embarrassed, will you tell me what you did?"

Harry expertly flicked the omelette, chopping up some bacon to toss on top. "I set a series of detection wards, which are tied into the mirrors I gave the three of you, and also an anti-apparition and anti-portkey ward, with the Portkey box obviously excluded from. There's also a defensive ward, designed to fire stunning spells at anyone who tries to launch offensive magic at the house."

Hermione nodded, absently getting plates out of the cupboard.

The smell of delicious food made the elder Grangers hurry with their dressing, dashing down to the kitchen to sample more of Harry's delicious cooking.

“Morning, honey.” Emma said, kissing her daughter’s cheek as she passed. “Morning, Harry.” She gave him an identical kiss on the cheek, remembering the scene yesterday, when he’d blown half of the light bulbs up. “Smells lovely, Harry.”

“Thanks, Emma.” Harry said with a blush. “It should be ready in a couple minutes.”

“Excellent.” Dan came in, sitting at the table and grabbing a knife and fork. “Morning, kids.”

“Morning, Dad.”

“Good morning, Dan.”

“So, that weird feeling this morning was...”

Harry tipped the omelette onto a plate, grabbing more bacon and a large platter of toast. “I set up some wards around the house. They’re keyed to your mirrors. If they go off, you can see who’s coming. If it’s anyone suspicious or they attempt to attack the house, a stunner will knock them out. They’re not war-wards, but they’re good for peace-time circumstances.”

Dan took a bite of omelette and groaned. “Damn, this is good! You sure you don’t want to join us as the cook?” He swallowed and looked at Harry. “Will we need war-wards?”

“Eventually.”

“And you can place those?”

“Yes.” Harry took a bite of his omelette, and pronounced it ‘acceptable’. “If I place them now, however, we’ll get some curious visitors from the Ministry of Magic. They’ll want to know why a non-magical house is warded so strongly. They’ll ask questions we really don’t want to answer.”

Dan just nodded slowly. "So, aside from protecting the house and making another truly outstanding breakfast, what are your plans for the day?"

A big fight. "I need to go and visit a house in London for a bit, and possibly a trip to the Yorkshire Dales."

"Is this another one of those answers that technically answers the question, but doesn't actually tell us anything?" Hermione asked, grabbing more toast.

"Yes."

"Will you need help?"

"Possibly. However, I'd rather try and do it alone first."

"Won't that be dangerous?"

Hell, yes! "I'm hopeful that I'll be okay." Harry stood, grabbing the pot of tea he'd made. He quickly poured the four cups' worth, adding milk and sugar automatically. "I'll be okay, Hermione. Promise."

With a slow nod, Hermione returned to breakfast.

After clearing up the dishes, (and shooing the Grangers out of the kitchen), Harry headed into his Portkey box. Slowly, he set the co-ordinates, and dematerialised the ship. While he flight, he took a few deep breaths.

"I'm sorry for what I let happen last time... I'll fix it. I promise..." He said slowly, knowing that it would only be a short time before he was back in a building he'd sworn never to return to.

Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.

– CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN –

The Most Noble and Ancient House of Black

While in flight, Harry altered the ship's course, heading to Diagon Alley first. He desperately needed to pick up a newspaper... if he was right, and the joy of his future knowledge meant that he usually was, today was the day of the infamous Daily Prophet prize draw... which meant it was the catalyst for the events of the year.

Once in Diagon Alley, he quickly picked up a copy of the Prophet, spotting the article of the front page. With a grin, he passed five Knuts to Tom the barman, before heading back into the box. So... phase one of Sirius' escape is complete. Now, I need to get to work on stage three; the place where Sirius can hide while in the UK. Stage two is up to you, old dog... Please pay attention. Harry reset the co-ordinates and headed out.

The ship had materialised in the small grassy park on Grimmauld Place. Harry remembered landing his Firebolt here during the run up to his fifth year in the original timeline. At that point, Grimmauld Place had already had a group of people setting up protections and removing the worst of the infestations. The house he was about to step into hadn't had the benefit of Sirius, Remus and the Weasleys fighting against it.

More to the point, Kreacher would be hostile, since he wasn't coming into the house with Sirius. After watching Dobby blast Lucius Malfoy back, he knew just how powerful the little buggers could be... and he was going to face a house elf that was, at best, hateful towards a half-blood like him.

Ah, well... not getting anything sorted by standing here moping, am I? Harry reached out and slid a lever up, unsealing the doors, and stepped forward. Once outside the box, Harry closed the door, willing it to seal shut, before he walked out of the park, crossing the road casually as he stepped up to Number Twelve.

The house reeked of darkness as he mounted the steps. It was dank, dirty and depressing. He could certainly understand why Sirius had

hated spending time there, and why he'd ran away as soon as he could. He pressed his hand to the doorknob, feeling the magic of the house testing him. It also made his skin crawl, like ants picking at his flesh.

Something tingled against the edge of his mental shields, prompting him to narrow his eyes slightly. I am the Heir of Sirius Black, Heir apparent to the most Ancient and Noble House of Black. He thought loudly, knowing the passive Legilimency on the door would be able to pick it up.

You are not pure, filth. The house sent back, feeling almost malevolent.

I am the son of a pureblood lord. Harry shot back. I am a Lord in my own right. I am the Heir of your current Lord, who is my Godfather.

You are still a mongrel.

Perhaps... but my rights of entry into the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black are assured. You will let me in.

The house didn't send back a response, but Harry could feel the door tremble slightly under his hand, as the magic of the house obeyed the rule and unlocked the door. With a sigh, Harry slowly turned the handle, pushing the door open and stepping back. He could tell that even the door wasn't happy about this, and that was just slightly rotting wood; Merlin only knew what something with a pulse would attempt.

A dagger, glowing green with poison, shot out, flying through the space Harry had occupied just a moment earlier. I guess Merlin and I know, now. A quick 'Accio!' summoned the dagger back, making sure it didn't hit any people who may have been walking by. He allowed the dagger to fall to the stoop, stepping over it.

Once inside, Harry closed the door, keeping a full-body shield up as he stepped into the foyer. Instantly, he could see the hated painting of Walburga Black, Sirius' 'lovely' mother, waiting to begin screeching.

Harry took in the lay of the land, spotting nothing waiting for him... at the moment. There'd be more to come. He knew that.

With a sigh, he stepped forward, letting the portrait spot him.

"Filth!" The portrait began screeching at once. "Scum! Mudblood!"

"Hello, Mrs. Black." Harry said faux-politely. "How lovely to see you again."

"Who are you, Mudblood child?"

"My name is Harry James Potter, Heir Apparent to the Most Noble and Ancient House of Black. I am the godson of Sirius Orion Black."

"Filth!" Walburga shrieked. "Son of a Mudblood! How dare you enter my house?"

"Quite easily," Harry replied, "since it's not your house. You're a corpse. This house belongs to Sirius, and I aim to make certain that when he returns, he won't have the 'pleasure' of your incessant wailing and shrieking. Now, why don't you sod off and die?"

"Already have done."

"Encore!"

"Kreacher!"

Shit... Harry drew his wand, wanting the focus available in case he needed the aiming capability. He heard the foul little creature appear near the stairs, and suppressed the urge to brutally murder the little bastard. Even though Kreacher had died under the 'tender mercies' of Bellatrix last time, as far as Harry was concerned, he still owed the little rat a good killing for leading Sirius to his death.

Kreacher shuffled round the staircase into the hall, spotting Harry stood near his beloved mistress' painting. He didn't know who Harry was, but the fact he was intruding on his mistress' home was enough.

“Kreacher, stop!” Harry commanded sharply, not wanting to get into a fight with the elf. “I am Harry James Potter, the Heir of Sirius Black, your master!”

Kreacher just growled, clicking his fingers as he tried to banish Harry from the house.

Harry gritted his teeth as the banishing charm hit his shield, causing it to flare brightly in the house. He could feel himself slowly being pushed back, and dug into his magic to stop himself flying backwards.

“Aguamenti!” A blast of freezing cold water erupted from Harry’s wand, slamming into the little elf and flinging him backwards into the kitchen. Instantly, the force pushing Harry back ceased, allowing him a precious moment to brace himself.

With a snarl, Kreacher picked himself up, sending a black light at Harry.

“Shit...” Harry put more power into his shield, knowing that the hallway was too narrow to dodge to one side. The mass hit his shield, the two energies battling for dominance. With another flash, Harry’s shield collapsed, allowing the black mass to hit his side painfully. Harry cried out as he felt a wet pop, knowing that at least two of his still-healing ribs had come apart.

“Glacius!” The freezing charm instantly turned all the water on the floor to ice, making Kreacher slip and fall to his knees.

“Electro!” Harry aimed his wand at the ice, aiming to electrify the whole thing.

Kreacher’s head shot up as he vanished with a ‘crack’, leaving the ice behind.

“Bloody hell...” Harry staggered forward, ignoring the screaming, spitting and cursing of the painting. “Little bastard...” He grouched, sending out a pulse of his magic. He could feel the pulse vibrate and bounce off far too many magical objects for his ‘sonar’ to work properly.

“Oh, this just gets better and better...” He groaned, “I fucking hate fighting House Elves...” He enchanted his belt buckle with a full body shield, meaning that he wouldn’t have to waste either his wand or off-hand conjuring one, allowing him the potential for multiple offensive spells.

He dashed around the staircase, throwing himself to the ground as something hit the bottom of the banister, vaporising the old wood. Harry poked his wand out, firing off a series of banishing charms. Damn it... Kreacher, you little bastard, why won’t you just stop! Harry peered out, spotting a pair of malevolent green eyes staring at him intently from the landing.

“Kreacher, you little shit, get your arse out here and fight me!” Harry commanded imperiously.

“Kreacher won’t obey. He won’t!” The little elf sent the elf-equivalent of a bone-breaking hex at Harry, slamming into his shield angrily. Harry gritted his teeth, reaching out with his magic to dissipate the curse from eating through his shields.

I fucking hate fighting house elves! Harry roared mentally, focussing all his power into his wand, before sending out a ridiculously over-powered banishing charm. Kreacher ducked, the banisher coring a section of the back wall. “I don’t want to hurt you, Kreacher.” Harry fired another banishing charm, the spell hit Kreacher, blasted him back into the landing wall and sending a large portion of it toppling down on top of the elf. Harry could almost hear the elf become unconscious, as the wave of magic pounding on his shield dissipated. “Doesn’t mean I won’t.” He slowly dropped his shield, not taking his eyes off the elf.

“Jesus...” Harry gathered his reserves of strength and began making his way to the stairs. Slowly, not wanting to exacerbate the injury, he climbed the stairs, keeping his wand aimed at the rubble at the top. He stepped over a large brick, seeing the tiny hand of the elf poking out.

A casual flick of his wand banished most of the debris, leaving Kreacher's unconscious form. "Well... you wanted to attack me," Harry said firmly, "I have the perfect punishment in mind." He cast a Petrificus spell, before binding the evil little rodent in unbreakable ropes. Enervate.

Kreacher's eyes snapped open, before focussing on Harry. "Filthy half-blood mongrel thinks he can-"

"Silence." Harry commanded imperiously. "I do not give you leave to speak."

The magic that connected Kreacher to the Ancient and Noble House of Black finally kicked in, letting the mentally-diseased little elf know that this was a member of the family that he was attacking. He glared hatefully at Harry.

"Kreacher, I'm charging you of the crimes that you have committed... and the crimes you're going to commit. The sentence is death. How do you plead?" He waited for a moment, before rolling his eyes. "I give you leave to speak."

"Kreacher will not bow to worthless little half-blood." The elf said mutinously.

"Then the sentence is confirmed." Harry raised his wand, glaring at the little being. "Are you prepared to die?"

"Kreacher will join his family on the wall." The elf declared proudly. "Kreacher was a good elf for the House of Black."

Harry's wand dipped slightly. "Oh, you won't end up on the wall, Kreacher. You won't escape your fate that easily."

The little elf's face frowned. "Dirty Master would stop Kreacher's reward? Mudblood-loving master sick in the head."

Harry shook his head slowly, smirking at Kreacher. "You are sentenced to death, Kreacher... the death of personality!" His wand raised, pointing directly at Kreacher's eyes. "Obliviate!"

Cornelius Fudge stepped off the boat, pulling his cloak tighter around him. Although this was a necessary part of his Ministerial duties, he hated having to inspect Azkaban. It was always so cold, dark, dank and depressing. All in all, he'd rather have been at home, where he could have a relaxing rest in his hot-tub with whatever assistant or secretary he could 'persuade' to join him. Sometimes, Lucius sent round a female messenger with some proposal he'd want looking at, and the messenger was always willing ensure the Minister was relaxed by the time he read the bill.

He nodded sulkily at the warden of the prison, a fat little creature called Hobbins, who was desperately trying to get his release from the foul assignment. "Ah, Minister..." He toadied, "it's wonderful to see you again, sir."

"Hobbins." Fudge snapped back. "What news of the inmates?"

Hobbins pulled a clipboard from above his desk and gestured to the doors. "There have been seven short-stay prisoners in the last twelve months, Minister. Each of them was released at the correct time. Of the long-term prisoners, two more have passed beyond threshold."

"'Passed beyond threshold'?" Fudge's Auror guard, a tall, bald-headed Auror, asked. "What does that mean?"

Hobbins sighed dramatically. "It means that they've completed the first part of their sentence here at Azkaban."

The Auror, a young man named Shackbolt, felt his eyes narrow and his stomach rebel at the casual statement. "I assume that means they've now gone insane?"

"That's one way of putting it." Fudge said. "These prisoners were sentenced to life in prison for their crimes. That is what we take. Passing into insanity because of the Dementors is stage one of their punishment. Their souls have been pretty much consumed by the Dementors. Now, we just have to wait for them to die, and we'll be removing more of the criminal element from the world."

Shacklebolt suppressed an urge to growl... and punch his employer. "That seems remarkably cold, Minister."

"That's the way the world works, Auror." Fudge snapped. "Do not question me." He turned back to Hobbins. "Well, let's get on with it, then. We still have to get this blasted inspection out of the way. I have better things to do with my time than walk around this depressing hole and stare at murderers."

Hobbins led the small party to the main corridor, where they could either inspect the minimum-security prisoners, or take the stairs down to maximum-security, where murderers and Dark Lord supporters such as Bellatrix Lestrange and Sirius Black were being held.

"Let's just get this out of the way." Fudge snarled, heading for the staircase. He quickly passed the three unconscious prisoners, glad that these three had lost their minds. He saw Bellatrix Lestrange sitting on her bed, rocking slightly as she glared up at the visitor.

"Lestrange..." Fudge said quietly. "You'll be glad to hear that your master's still dead."

"He will return." Bella hissed malevolently. "He will return and kill you all."

"Not while I'm the Minister." Fudge replied pompously. "I won't allow it."

Bellatrix just laughed. "He will kill you. You wouldn't even slow my master down."

"Then I'm fortunate he's no threat, aren't I?" Fudge said as he turned away. "Warden, increase her Dementor exposure."

Bellatrix shivered slightly, but refused to let her face show her fear of the vile creatures.

"Yes, Minister."

Fudge kept walking, approaching the last cell on this corridor. "Ah, yes... Sirius Black. Mass-Murderer and Betrayer."

Sirius looked up from his bunk, standing and heading to within three feet of the door. Any closer was risking being stunned by the Auror party. He knew this... it'd happened before. "Minister Fudge... Sweet Merlin, has it been twelve months since your last inspection? Doesn't time fly? Of course, I don't have much to distract me these days."

Fudge blinked at the response. "You're still sane, Black?"

The Prisoner of Azkaban just shrugged. "We all have our moments of insanity, Minister, even you; I remember the Goblin pies story from the Quibbler. Any news from the outside you'd like to share? It gets so dull here..."

His eyes narrowed, Fudge just snarled. "After all this time, Black, you should be insane. I'll have to see what we can do to quicken that up."

"Perhaps." Sirius replied, clearly bored. "In the meantime, sir, have you finished with your newspaper?" He gestured to the folded-up Prophet tucked under Fudge's arm. "I find myself lacking things to do... and I really miss the crossword."

Fudge snatched the paper from under his arm and tossed it through the bars. "Take it, you filthy murderer! I suppose letting you see what decent, normal folk are doing will be a sweet punishment."

Sirius nodded, picking up the paper. There, on the front page, was an article he'd been waiting nearly two years for.

Ministry of Magic Employee Scoops Grand Prize!

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, has won the annual Daily Prophet Grand Prize Galleon Draw.

A delighted Mr. Weasley told the Daily Prophet, "We will be spending the gold on a summer holiday in Egypt, where our eldest son, Bill, works as a curse breaker for Gringotts Wizarding Bank."

The Weasley family will be spending a month in Egypt, returning for the start of the new school year at Hogwarts, which five of the Weasley children currently attend.

Next to the body of text was a photograph. He looked closer, seeing the sign that the mysterious Mr. Stripeclaw had warned him about. Time to go... He thought to himself. He looked up to see Fudge staring intently at him.

"What?" He glanced down. "I see Weasley's won a prize. Good for him. I remember he was a good man."

Fudge just scowled and strode away, the fat little warden pursuing him like he had broken underwear elastic.

On the other hand, Kingsley Shacklebolt remained outside the cell, looking closely at Sirius. "You're not what I expected." The Auror said after a moment, his voice sounding like two rocks being ground together.

"Being enigmatic's very popular with the ladies." Sirius said slowly. "Of course, the selection here is kinda limited."

"Indeed. Do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

"No."

"How are you still sane? From what I understand, Dementors leach all happy thoughts from a person, draining them of their soul and their powers."

"I know." Sirius said, sighing heavily. "I've seen it happen to far too many people over the last twelve years."

"And yet, you're here, hale and hearty."

"Indeed. Must have found a way to keep some happy thoughts."

Shacklebolt nodded. "You intrigue me, Mr. Black."

“Thank you.”

“Do you mind if I use you for a case-study?”

Sirius chuckled rustily. “Knock yourself out, Auror. I’m fascinating.”

“Thank you.” Shacklebolt nodded amiably, before following the Minister up the corridor.

The instant Shacklebolt was gone, Sirius moved over to the window, staring intently at the article and, more importantly, the photo. Little toe-rag... that’s Wormtail, all right... Little bastard managed to escape. And now he’s hiding with the Weasleys... I have to go... I have to get out of here... He’s at Hogwarts...

Sirius tucked the newspaper under his pillow, lying down. He couldn’t leave right this second, since the guards would still be patrolling vigilantly. They always did for a day or two after the Minister’s inspection. He sighed, wishing he had a chicken leg to munch on.

Harry stared at the unconscious little elf and smiled in pleasure. It was done. In a way, he’d avenged Sirius’ death in the previous timeline by killing Kreacher. True, the body was still alive, but it wasn’t Kreacher... or rather, it wasn’t the same Kreacher that had conspired with Narcissa to betray Sirius. The elderly elf was effectively mind-wiped, and could be reprogrammed into something more respectable, something a lot less rude... and hopefully something that wouldn’t walk around in just an old loincloth. One of Harry’s biggest dreads about redeeming Kreacher was if the old elf sneezed suddenly, and his loincloth fell and... Harry started to gag, so put the idea from his mind.

It took only a moment for Harry to begin the necessary modifications to Kreacher’s mind. It was unfortunate that he wasn’t a Legilimens, which would have made things go much more smoothly, but it was a simply matter for Harry to program into some basic English lessons, a desire to live in a clean house and a desire to learn. That would be enough to get the elf started. His magic, on the other hand, was something that Harry couldn’t teach him. From what he’d learned from Dobby in the previous timeline, house elf magic was almost all

instinctive. They just did things as they needed. No spells, no rituals... just living magic.

As soon as Harry was sure that the elf was safe, he'd release him and get him working on the shithole that was Grimmauld Place.

Enervate. "Kreacher?" Harry said softly, banishing the ropes and removing the Petrification spell. "Kreacher, can you hear me?"

The little elf groaned as his eyes fluttered open. "Mister Harry?" The elf moaned softly, trying to sit up. "What happened, Mister Harry?"

Harry managed to suppress his smirk as he helped the elf to a sitting position. "Easy now, Kreacher. That was a bad accident. How do you feel?"

"I's... I feel quite bad, Mister Harry." Kreacher said, blinking as his mind processed information that seemed... different. "Accident?"

"Yes." Harry said. "You were moving one of the relics and it exploded. How're you feeling?"

"Like I got caught in an explosion." Kreacher said, looking around at the mess and feeling an overwhelming urge to not have his house be a mess. "Are you hurt, Mister Harry?"

"No, Kreacher. I'm not hurt. Thank you for asking." Harry helped the little elf to his feet before he waved his wand at the wall. "Reparo." The debris rose from the floor, moving back into place on the wall. Since Harry'd already vanished some of it, there were still some rather obvious cracks and holes in the wall.

Kreacher noticed this and clicked his fingers, conjuring new bricks and mortar, filling in the hole neatly. He looked at Harry, who was beaming at him. "What is it, Mister Harry?"

"Nothing, Kreacher." Harry said. "That was well done. Thank you for clearing it up."

The old elf blushed faintly. "You are most welcome..." He trailed off. "It is curious, Mister Harry... I find myself... confused."

"Oh?" Harry discretely summoned a stunner into his hand, ready to throw it the instant the elf turned on him. "Confused about what, Kreacher?"

"I... I seem to have gaps in my memory, Mister Harry."

"Well, a bad accident like that can cause amnesia, Kreacher. I'm sure your memories will make their way back slowly." So slowly, it'll be the twelfth of never before they come back. "In the meantime, I think you should just take it easy."

Kreacher looked around the depressing house sharply. "I has... have work to do, Mister Harry. This house... is such a mess. I don't know why..."

Harry didn't say anything about the mess. "Well... I'm sure you will take it easy while you're cleaning, Kreacher. Master Sirius won't be home for a while yet..."

"Master Sirius?" Kreacher looked up at Harry, then around the house. "Oh dear... poor Master Sirius would be shamed of this house. I must begin immediately."

Harry nodded and stood back. "One thing, Kreacher..."

"Yes, Mister Harry?"

"Perhaps the painting of Lady Walburga should be removed from the entryway... the poor dear," Harry managed to suppress his disgusted expression of referring to the crazy bitch by the proper name, "seems to be a little... disturbed. Perhaps one of the bedrooms could be made into a shrine to the Black Family. You know... all their family honours in one place."

"Of course, Mister Harry." Kreacher said, clicking his fingers, removing the vile portrait from the wall. It began floating towards the stairs, screaming depreciations all the way. "Perhaps a silencing

charm around the room.” Kreacher said diplomatically. “So that people can enjoy the shrine room in peace and quiet.”

Snickering, Harry nodded. “An excellent idea, Kreacher.” He was about to turn and walk away, when a thought crossed his mind. “Kreacher... can you deliver something to another house for me?”

“Of course, Mister Harry.”

Conjuring a piece of paper and a pen (knowing that the recipient of this letter would detest the fact it wasn’t written on parchment), he quickly scribbled a note, infusing the ink and the paper with a strong compulsion charm. Let’s see you avoid this one, you evil bastard. Harry folded the note over, before handing it to Kreacher, whispering the destination. Kreacher nodded, let the portrait of Walburga fall onto a bed in one of the bedrooms, and vanished with a pop.

Right... now he’s gone, I want that bloody Horcrux. Harry shot down the stairs, heading into the drawing room, and the cabinet at the back. He could see all manner of dark object sitting in the cupboard, waiting for some dozy wizard to come and pick it up. The sleeping music box, the snuffbox full of wartcap powder... all of these were bypassed as Harry spotted the locket. There you are...

Conjuring a pair of thick leather gloves, Harry pulled them on and picked up the object. Instantly, he cast a stasis charm and an imperturbable charm, before conjuring a lead-lined box. These measures would, hopefully, be enough to contain the Horcrux, before he could destroy it. It wasn’t yet the right time, however, for that to happen. If he interfered now... No. Best not think about that. Tucking the box into a pocket, he pulled off the gloves, and glanced around the house. Anything else I need to do? Ah, best leave a note.

Harry quickly conjured another piece of paper, writing down a list of instructions for Kreacher. He quickly checked the note, and pronounced it good.

Kreacher,

You said that you wanted to clean the house for Master Sirius, and I, as the Heir Apparent of the House of Black, support this measure. It

would be best if you were to do the work in secret. If you require funds to clean up the house, the vault of Black is still at Gringotts, and can be accessed by yourself. Make certain that you protect the vault, allowing only yourself and Master Sirius access.

Also, Master Sirius would not want an elf that is incapable of speaking correctly or being woefully uninformed. There is a large collection of books in the library, and I will be able to gain other books, such as fiction, for you. If you need anything, please send me a letter. Good penmanship will be appreciated.

Remember, do not exert yourself, Kreacher. You're still recovering from the accident.

Kind Regards,
Harry Potter

He placed the note on the table, and headed out of the door. He winced as he clambered down the steps, feeling the ravaged ribs protest. Bollocks... only just managed to get these taped up last time. He placed his hand against the door of the Portkey box, before stepping inside. A moment later, a wheezing/groaning sound signalled the departure of the box from Grimmauld Place.

Lucius Malfoy frowned as he saw the bedraggled house elf appear in his home. "What do you want, vermin?" He asked belligerently.

"My Master has commanded me to deliver this letter to you." Kreacher said politely, managing to avoid looking down his nose at the rude human.

"You dare speak to me?" Lucius asked, shocked that the elf had the temerity to answer back. "Punish yourself at once!"

"I do not obey you." Kreacher replied. "I only obey my Master and his heir."

Lucius snarled as he grabbed the letter from Kreacher's hand, feeling the paper and sneering. As soon as he opened it, the compulsion washed over him. He didn't fight it too hard, since it was something he wanted to do anyway. "Dobby!"

The battered elf appeared with a loud 'crack', barely able to stay on his feet. Kreacher could feel his lip curl as he took in his battered fellow elf. He knew, instinctively, that Master Sirius and Mister Harry would never treat a house elf like this, but he managed to stamp down his disgust.

"Master calls for D-Dobby?" The little elf swayed dangerously, before Kreacher was there, helping to steady him. A few waves of his hand cleared up most of the injuries, allowing Dobby to stand on his own.

"Here!" Malfoy took off his cloak, throwing it onto Dobby. "You are released from my service, you disgusting little beast! Now leave!"

Dobby felt the magic that bound him to the House of Malfoy shatter, and instantly popped out. It didn't matter where he went... only that he was free.

Kreacher bowed to Malfoy, before flicking him the bird as he vanished, following Dobby's trail. For some reason, Dobby wasn't travelling as fast as he could, which gave Kreacher enough time to catch up with him. Dobby, son of Keldon?

Dobby blinked as he felt the other elf match his pop, the two now travelling in tandem. Dobby is... who's is you?

I am Kreacher, of the Ancient and Noble House of Black. Do you have anywhere to go, little one?

Dobby is free... but Dobby has no place. He sighed, wondering if it was such a good thing to have freedom, instead of just wanting it.

Your freedom is your own, little one. You have time to choose where you wish. I would suggest, however, that you find Mister Harry Potter. It was he who asked that I aid in your escape from the Malfoy family. Kreacher could feel Dobby's excitement at the mention of Harry Potter. If you need assistance, young one, you may call on me. Kreacher changed his direction, heading back to Grimmauld Place.

Dobby could feel that he was alone, but he wasn't scared. The old elf was right... he was free, now. Free to do as he wished. He began to

search for his saviour, wanting to thank him personally... before he changed his mind. He'd find Harry Potter sir and thank him later... now, it was time to be free!

Harry was in the kitchen of his Portkey box, cooking up a storm. He'd prepared two whole chickens and a tub of mashed potatoes, along with a large bottle of pumpkin juice. He'd already written out his latest letter to Padfoot, taking note of the information in the Daily Prophet. He conjured a basket, quickly turning it into a Portkey, before loading up the food. God speed, Padfoot... He thought, as he tapped the basket with his wand, activating the Portkey.

Once it had departed, he headed back into the console room, and levered up a section of the floor. He dropped down ten feet, standing on the physical floor of the box. He opened a small compartment, tucking the lead-lined box inside, before sealing it up again. The Horcrux would be safe in there.

Sirius heard a faint whistling sound as something began to appear in his cell. He smiled as another basket of food appeared, a note stuck to the top. Stripeclaw, I love you! He thought happily, reaching down to grab the note and, more importantly, a chicken leg.

Dear Padfoot,

Well, I'm gonna hazard a guess that Fudge is there, right this minute. Have you seen him yet? If you have, and you remembered my previous notes, you'll have a copy of today's Daily Prophet in hand. If you haven't seen him yet, for the love of god, hide this basket and note. And when you do see him, get his copy of the paper!

Assuming you've seen the paper, you'll now understand what I meant about the sign. Front page, look at the photo of the Weasley family. Notice anything about the pet on Ron Weasley's shoulder? You should.

Yes, it's Wormtail. The little rat-bastard managed to hide in a Wizing home for over ten years, while you were stuck at that rock on the sea. Unfortunately, they'll be in Egypt up until August 30th, so it'll be damned hard for you to get him before then. Guess you'll have to make your way up to Hogwarts.

Harry's been doing very well this year. I just thought you'd like to know. He has a girlfriend, a woman who will probably remind you of

Lily Potter quite a bit. A smart, beautiful bookworm, with just the right amount of Marauder in her.

Moving on, it's time to leave Azkaban, Mr. Padfoot. Mr. Moony will be working at Hogwarts this year as the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. There are questions that you'll need to ask him, like 'why the hell haven't you been to see the pup/cub yet?'. Included in this basket are some nutrient potions and a change of clothes. I have the suspicion that you're going to try and see your godson... you wouldn't want to frighten the poor lad, would you? Take a hint.

Be safe, Padfoot. I'll be seeing you soon.

Stripeclaw

Sirius folded the note and tucked the basket under the stone slab that was his bed. "Soon..." He muttered, not seeing the guard passing by his cell. "Soon... he's at Hogwarts..." He drifted off to sleep.

Harry had returned to the Grangers' house, attempting to sneak in and bandage up his ribs before he was caught. Naturally, his luck really was that shitty as he was not only caught by Hermione with his shirt up and a bandage in his hand, but her parents, too.

"Er... hi?" He said sheepishly, running his wand over the bruised flesh. "How was your day?"

Hermione took the bandage from his hand, while turning him round, so she could see the true extent of his injuries. "What happened?" She asked coolly.

"Well... it's, er... Would you believe me if I said I fell?"

"No." All three Grangers said together.

"How about if I said a panel in the portkey box came loose?"

"No." All three Grangers said together.

"Squirrel attack?"

"No."

“Choked on toast?”

“No.”

“Craptacular...” Harry sighed. “I was attempting to do some cleaning in a house in London. Unfortunately, there was a... well...”

Hermione plucked his wand out of his fingers, gently prodding and poking him to make certain that he’d healed the bones. “A what, Harry?”

“You know how if a house gets left alone for a long time, there’s a really good chance that it’ll pick up an infestation? Rats, bird, wasps... that sort of thing?”

Nodding slowly, Hermione began wrapping Harry’s torso with the bandage, making certain it was good and tight. “I assume this was a very large wasp?”

“Well...” Harry hissed as Hermione tugged a little too hard. “N-Not exactly, no. Magical creatures are a little more... aggressive than a wasp. Doesn’t matter, though. I evicted the little rodent.”

“A magical rat?” Emma asked, stepping forward and helping her daughter inspect him for other injuries. “What’re they like?”

“About two feet long, very fast. Quite feral, in some cases.” Harry replied, lifting his arms so they ladies could finish checking him out. “Managed to knock it out, though, then I chucked it out. Little thing won’t be coming back.”

“A rat?” Hermione chuckled mirthlessly. “I’ve never heard of a magical rat that can break ribs, Harry.” She folded her arms and looked sternly at him. “You told me you’d be okay if you went and did this alone.”

He pulled her into a hug, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “I’m all right, Hermione. The rat just got lucky. I’m perfectly okay.”

She held him, trembling slightly for a few moments, before nodding. "Don't keep doing this to me, Harry." She said seriously. "I'm scared for you."

"I won't. I promise. This was one of the nastier aspects of the summer holiday I needed to get done. I have to do a couple of pick-ups, dinner with the Patil, Bones and Zabini families, and a holiday away. Oh, and I have to do some sewing. Apart from that, I'm all yours."

"Promise?" Hermione looked up at him nervously, not paying attention to the slightly dreamy look on Emma's face, not the resigned look on Dan's.

"Forever." Harry said, staring back at her, his heart and soul in his eyes, making Hermione blush and nod.

It'd been two days since Fudge had inspected Azkaban. Two days since he'd seen the newspaper, announcing the Weasleys winning the prize draw and giving Sirius his first clue about the fate of Peter Pettigrew. Two days since the sign he'd been waiting for had appeared.

Sirius slowly hauled himself out of his 'bed', reaching underneath for the basket that had been delivered. Inside was a selection of heavy clothes, each of them lined with warming charms. He quickly changed, using his old shirt as a cleaning rag to scrub off most of the muck. Once attired in his new clothes, he changed form, Sirius flowing into Padfoot.

He trotted forward, his mind and emotions more primal than they were a few moments earlier. This was the joy of being an Animagus; the more primal emotions fooling the Dementors into believing that he was becoming as deranged as everyone else. He pushed his head through the bars, looking round to see a Dementor at the end of the corridor, hovering outside Bellatrix's cell. He shuddered slightly, before concentrating on the task at hand.

Because he'd been receiving the food baskets from the mysterious Stripeclaw, he wasn't quite as thin as he used to be, and pulling himself through the bars hurt quite a bit. Fortunately, the primal mind

of Padfoot wouldn't allow something as trivial as physical pain to stop him succeeding in his escape. He growled low in his throat as his ribs grated against the bars, but he managed to slip through, slumping to the ground for a moment.

He was out of his cell... Padfoot's mind worked on a very basic, instinctual level. Step one of the escape plan had been accomplished. Now, however, he needed to get past the dark cape at the end of the long room. He trotted forward, keeping low to the ground.

The Dementor looked up as it sensed emotions, weak, primal emotions, moving towards it. However, they were a little too weak to bother about. Inside the cell, the fierce, happy pride of Bellatrix Lestranger waited. It turned back, its blindness meaning that it never saw Padfoot slink past.

Once out of the corridor, Padfoot bounded up the stairs, tongue lolling out like a pink rope, heading for the top of Azkaban. He knew that there was no way he'd be able to walk out of the front doors. They were guarded by at least six Dementors at any one time, with a plentiful selection of other assorted nasty wards and Auror guards.

At the top, however, there wasn't anything that would be able to stop him. At the top of the stairs, he changed back, becoming Sirius once more. Glancing around, Sirius slowly circled the ramparts, looking down at the jagged rocks below.

"It's times like this," He muttered to himself, "that I wish I was a bird Animagus..." Glancing down, he saw the jagged rocks that made of the base of the fortress. "Merlin, I hope I don't fall down there..."

It took him less than a quarter hour to spot the point of the island with the narrowest base. This was where he'd have to jump... and hope the shock of landing two hundred feet in ice-cold water wouldn't kill him. He flowed back into Padfoot, before he used every ounce of strength he had to dash forward, mounting the ramparts and jumping off the edge...

Harry woke up, yawning and scratching. He climbed out of bed, heading for the bathroom to perform his usual morning ablutions. As

soon as he entered the bathroom, he heard another bedroom door open, and had to suppress a smile. Ever since the 'incident', Hermione had been loitering around him, making certain that he didn't try and sneak off anywhere and get himself in trouble. Under other circumstances, it would have been wildly funny, but Harry knew she cared about him, and hated to see him hurt.

He opened the bathroom door, poking his head, only to see Hermione peering at him. "I'm just getting dressed for the day." Harry said soothingly. "I promise I'm not sneaking out anywhere." He smiled cheekily. "If you hear the Mission: Impossible theme, though..."

Hermione nodded, before retreating back into her bedroom. Harry thought for a moment, before stepping out of the bathroom and knocking on her door. A moment later, she opened it, looking at him curiously. "What's up?"

"Can I come in and talk to you?" He asked, all traces of levity gone.

"Sure." Hermione opened the door fully and stepped back, allowing him inside. She didn't bother to close the door, knowing that her parents wouldn't be too impressed if she was in a bedroom with a boy and her door closed. "What can I do for you?"

"You're worried about me." Harry said bluntly. "You're worried that I'm going to sneak out and leave you behind and get myself hurt."

"Yes." Hermione replied, equally bluntly. "Damn it, Harry... you don't know how much it scares me when I see you hurt."

"I think I do." Harry said softly. "Remember, when you were petrified? I wasn't scared, Hermione... I was bloody terrified."

She softened. "I know, Harry... I know... so, you do understand why watching your put yourself at risk worries me."

"I do." He reached out and took her hand. "Hermione... there's things coming... I can feel them... Battles and danger..."

"I know." Hermione said, squeezing his hand. "I know you'll be one of the people on the front line, Harry. I know that... it's just..."

"You'll be there to protect me, Hermione." Harry said firmly. "Just like I'll protect you."

"Deal."

"Good." Harry pulled her hand up and kissed the back of it. "Now, I'm going to go shower. I promise I won't go anywhere unless I tell you first, okay?"

"Okay." Hermione smiled at him. "You won't run off and leave me behind?"

"No. I won't run off and leave you behind. I promise."

She smiled, leaned up and pressed a kiss onto his cheek, before charging out of the room, racing into the bathroom and locking the door.

"Hey!" Harry, blessed with future knowledge, was glad they hadn't had curry the previous night. He loved her fiercely, but Sweet Merlin, Hermione could bomb out a bathroom on the morning after.

Padfoot swam as fast as he could. The icy water was cutting into his skin like daggers and sapping him of his strength. He knew he was heading south, and he could see the sun rising to his left, which meant he was heading in the right direction, but he didn't know how much further he had to go.

But, Pettigrew was going to be at Hogwarts. He had to get to Pettigrew and kill him to protect Harry and avenge James and Lily. Nothing else mattered.

Redoubling his efforts, Padfoot swam harder.

Once showered and dressed, Harry went into the Portkey box, pulling out the laptop, before he re-entered the house, the computer tucked

under his arm. He sat down in the living room, pulling the computer onto his lap.

Hermione entered the room, looking around intently, as she'd heard the back door open. When she saw Harry sitting on the couch, she relaxed.

"I promised." Harry said, without looking up.

"I know."

"You were checking up on me."

"Not really." Hermione said slowly. "I was just wondering what you were up to. If you'd snuck out, I'd have heard the engine on your Box."

Harry nodded slowly. "Good point. Okay, today, I'm planning on working on some computer code. I've been putting this off for ages."

"Programming? What're you programming in?"

Blushing slightly, Harry told her, "Er... a seamstress program."

"A seamstress program?" Hermione asked, a slow smirk developing on her face. "What do you know about making clothes?"

"Not a lot." Harry admitted. "But, we've got all that basilisk hide, and I think it'd be a marvellous way of making certain that we're protected. I could make clothing out of it. That's why I had everyone put on those headbands on the train."

"I just thought you were trying to measure Sue's chest." Hermione snickered.

"Hermione."

"Sorry."

"I have the pinnacle of womankind as my girlfriend." Harry said, watching Hermione begin to blush furiously. "What on earth would I want with anyone else?"

"I... P-Pinnacle..."

Harry just smiled as he began typing. Granger 0, Potter 1.

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